

BUCK NAKED

in ANOTHER WORLD

NOVEL

2



WRITTEN BY
Madoka Kotani

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2

← NISHKA →

← GANGI MARI →

← YOI'HADY →

← SHOOTER →
(REAL NAME: YOSHIDA SHUTA)



◀ CASSANDRA ▶

◀ TANNE D'ARC ▶

◀ ELPACO ▶

◀ BASIL ▶

BUCK NAKED

in ANOTHER WORLD



**We'll Find
Happiness**

BUCK NAKED IN ANOTHER WORLD VOLUME 2

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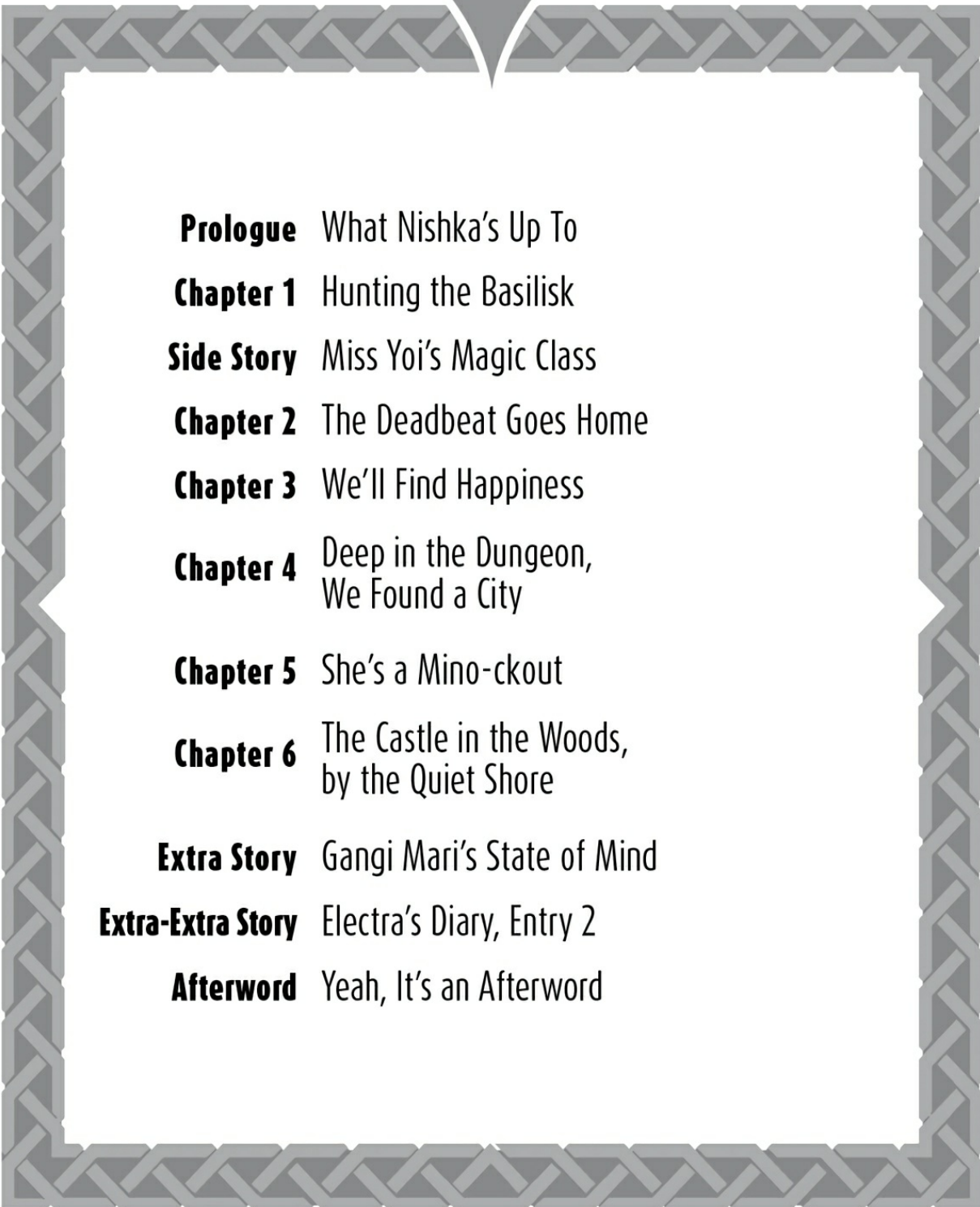


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Prologue:

What Nishka's Up To

THE RECEPTIONIST at the adventurer's guild said she'd treat me to a meal because I didn't have a copper coin to my name. I could be as suspicious as I wanted about her motives, but with that idiot Shooter missing and me sitting around starving to death, I couldn't really refuse.

"You were strong enough to take down a wyvern all by yourself, Nishka. If you knock out a couple of quests, I bet you could get in good with the top-level adventurers in a snap!"

This was after I wrapped up the job recruiting candidates for that urgent ogre-hunting quest. I went to get my pittance of copper coins from the girl working the reception counter, then she took me out to a tavern. A fashionable one, too, so it was perfect for someone like me. Not perfect for my wallet, I'll admit—if I hadn't had someone else paying for me, they wouldn't have let me within spitting distance of a ritzy place like that.

"C'mon, I told you I'm looking for a pal of mine. I'm all in on that. I'm out of the whole adventuring scene right now."

"Oh, really? I heard you can do wind magic, and that you're a top-notch talent with a bow. But then, adventurers and hunters just *love* to talk themselves up, so maybe I should pin a little asterisk on that one, eh?" she chortled.

"Hmph. You've got some guts, saying that to me. What do you think this is, hanging around my neck?" I snapped, rooting around my boobs and yanking out the wyvern scale.

"Oh, no, I didn't mean you, miss. People have been talking about a mighty warrior from a tribe that reveres nudity. I just don't believe a person like that really exists. Warrior nudist tribes? Sounds like something from a goofy book."

"Hmph! He's real enough to take someone out with nothing but a stick. Remember those adventurers from the guild? He pounded them to a pulp, ground 'em up, and then walloped them some more. You wouldn't be so wishy-

washy about it if you'd ever seen him."

"Wellll, I just don't know. He seems strong, but that still sounds a little like exaggeration."

"Yeah, well, whatever," I muttered and brought my mug to my lips.

The stone-faced receptionist didn't even react. Forget her. I had a beer with *pickled cherries*! Out in the sticks, all we got to drink was some cheap whisky or wine, but the townie stuff was tops!

Maybe all this glitz was what Shooter wanted: a slice of city life, instead of living in some poverty-stricken village. Or maybe he didn't want a mousey wife like Cassandra and had just been waiting for the perfect opportunity to run off. If that was true, I'm not sure I could ever forgive him. I'd bent over backwards to help him out. Those thoughts alone pissed me off, making me feel all gross and betrayed.

I was on the verge of really losing it, so I chugged my entire beer in one go. "Ahhh! That was delicious! All right, down to business. With the pay I'm gettin' now, I don't mind standing on street corners recruitin' adventurers or whatever. Shooter already footed the bill for the inn, so I can stay in town a while longer. But sooner or later, my funding is gonna run out if I'm just pulling in pocket money. I need info on that jerk."

"You mean Shooter?"

I slammed my empty mug back down on the table and leaned toward her. "Yeah."

"Well, if you want to gather information from adventurers, you may need to buy them drinks to get them to talk. Lots of them come through taverns like this, or hang around with the mercenaries in this neighborhood."

"I thought the people in here looked like a rough bunch. You're sayin' they're all adventurers?"

"I mean, like I said, some are mercenaries, and there are laborers here, too, but all the folks in a tavern packing weapons tend to be adventurers, yes. Look, that one's wearing chainmail. Definitely an adventurer."

The tavern was called The Arbor of Earth's Solace. A name to remember. Next time I made a bunch of money, I'd be sure to do some recon here.

I watched the scene, the sloppy expressions on the adventurers' faces pulling into grins by degrees with every new mug of ale. Jeez, just how much money was I gonna need to buy rounds for these guys?

"I'll show you how it's done, then you'll be good to gather information on your own." The girl smiled brightly at me and pointed out a man laughing boisterously at the far side of the tavern.

Hmm. I mean, he looked like he could hold his liquor, but at a glance, he looked pretty average as far as adventurers go. Not too intimidating either, but a bunch of other adventurers clustered around him. I guess he had the air of a leader.

"Come with me," said the receptionist. "That guy *loves* women."

"Uh, sure. I've got no problem buttering a guy up, but there are limits to how far I'll go. Got it?"

"He's actually a big wimp at heart, so he's always getting duped by women. You'll handle him just fine, Nishka."

Not super comforting, but I followed her over to the adventurers' leader anyway.

"Wow, I haven't seen you in so long!" the receptionist cried. "I was just thinking how you haven't been to the guild lately, and now here you are, spending big in the tavern! What, did you decide to leave the adventuring life behind?"

"Don't be silly!" the leader roared. "I was just thinking how much I've missed you too, my wee wittle dove. What about your friend there? Did she just start working at the guild?"

The leader guy was a fat, middle-aged man with a beard, and he went completely googly-eyed at the receptionist's totally fake smile. Once he got a look at my boobs and butt, his plump little face just lit up with delight.

Another perv, just like that jerk, Shooter.

“Of course not! Nishka’s an incredible hunter who recently decided to start adventuring! She said she’s looking for some new friends, and I thought maybe you would be able to help her with that, hm?”

“Oh really? Well, I consider myself a kindly gentleman. If you have any questions, you just come see me and I’ll be happy to help.”

I saw his hand creeping toward my butt to give it a stroke and—nah, nope, gotta have some standards here—I smacked his hand. Ugh, was acting like this really supposed to get me any info? Cringing deep inside, I pulled together a smile and said hello.

After a lot of work, I got the adventurers to promise they’d tell me if they heard anything. They even invited me on their next ogre hunt for my trouble... but they didn’t have any information on Shooter.

“Want to try on your own next, Nishka?”

“I-I don’t think I’m ready yet.”

“What, are you scared?”

“No, what? Come on, I’m Nishka the Scalesplitter! I’m not some scared, delicate little human!”

So those were my next few nights, getting lessons from the receptionist and working our way through the taverns. Took me three days, but I got the hang of it.

The day before I was supposed to go on the ogre-hunting quest with that beardy middle-aged guy, I managed to get the drunks talking easy-peasy, and I finally got to make my pitch.

“Identifying features on this guy? Sure, listen up. He’s dimwitted and buck naked. In the backwater I call home, they said he came from a tribe that was wiped out a long, long time ago who all revered nudity. You hear anything about a guy like that, come right to me. Hey, next one’s on me. Drink up!”

I worked my way around the room like that, sometimes slipping my spiel in at the end if I had to: “And tell your friends that Nishka the Scalesplitter is looking for a warrior called Shooter from a tribe of naked people.”

Oh, I bet Shooter would've loved knowing all the trouble I had to go through for him. That buck-ass little perv was gonna pay for this in blood when I found him!

Chapter 1:

Hunting the Basilisk

I DECIDED TO WALK AROUND and look for a water source nearby, never wandering too far from the remains of the settlement—I could still see it all from where I went, matter of fact—but I didn't find a drop. I also took care to turn over any big rocks I found along the way, just in case I uncovered another snake like earlier, but I wasn't that lucky.

I did find the huge, cylindrical remains of a well...but it was completely filled in. I guessed the village whose ruins we were camped in didn't have much luck, either.

But hey, I wasn't giving up yet! The fact that there used to be a settlement was reason enough to think a river might be nearby. After all, every ancient cradle of civilization developed along big rivers. Humans and water sources always come in the same package. Ergo, there had to be some water source nearby, right?

That train of thought led me to a spot a little farther away from our camp, and there it was: a river. It was in the opposite direction from the road, on the other side of the hill from the entrance to the dungeon. The shrubbery and broad-leaved trees that grew thick in this area had allowed it to escape my notice.

I read the land right! I patted myself on the back and gleefully slid down to the riverbank. I set aside the limp snake I was still carrying and scrubbed my hands thoroughly in the water, then took a drink. (After making it this far, I could hardly get too fussy about a lack of filtration.)

I swished the water around in my mouth to make sure I didn't drink too much all at once, then decided I should round up the rest of the party before going hog wild on the good, good wet stuff. I stood back up to do just that, and then it struck me.

Something about me really was different in this world.

I'd already faced kobolds, wyverns, and basilisks with just my own fleshbag to

back me up, so I didn't suddenly figure out I had cheat-code-level powers or anything like that. It wasn't like I could use magic on my own either, or that I'd awoken to some kind of "sixth sense."

No, it was my eyesight: I could see farther than I ever had before. Much farther.

Ever since I was a kid, my vision had been around twenty-twenty or so, I guess. It was never seriously bad, so I never needed glasses like Gangi Mari, but I also couldn't see as impossibly far as my wife Cassandra could.

But now, somehow, I could make out some kind of group creeping around downriver, and from much farther away than I could've before.

I squinted. "Who *are* those people? They're so tall..."

They looked like backcountry folk with sallow, mud-colored skin, and they wore loincloths like mine—that is, like I used to wear.

I could tell they were bad news. Don't know how I knew, but I was sure of it. I felt the breeze at my back—they were downwind—and I slowly retreated.

With my shortsword secure at my hip, I snatched the snake's tail and ran back to the settlement in a crouch.

Sickly looking giant people, huh? Were they giants? They were all huge—definitely over six feet, but none over ten.

I ran back to the ruined houses, glancing warily over my shoulder every couple steps. It didn't seem like they'd spotted me, and they weren't headed toward our camp, either.

I made it back to the ruins without making a sound, but that meant I caught Mari by surprise, and she almost drew her longsword on me.

"D-don't sneak up on me like that! Did you find any water?"

"I've got bad news. I saw some weird super-tall people who look like they live here. Wasn't this village supposed to be abandoned?"

Mari frowned. "I've never heard of anything like that. Do you know what he's talking about, Yoi?"

Yoi was playing with the baby basilisk. Without moving from where she was crouched in front of the little guy, she looked up at me and said, “I don’t know either, Mr. Slave.”

“They were giants. Looked like they were well over six feet tall. I found a river hidden in the bushes just over there, but I’m worried about getting near those guys. They were wearing loincloths, too. Are they civilized?” I tossed aside the snake I was holding so I could free up my hands and draw my shortsword.

“Tall people wearing loincloths? That sounds like...”

“Did you see their faces or what color their skin was, Mr. Slave?”

Mari and my young mistress talked over each other with a barrage of questions.

Meanwhile, the baby basilisk snapped at the snake I had lobbed aside, enjoying the fun little diversion. He must’ve been really hungry. Poor little guy wouldn’t have time to eat, though, because it was looking like we had to get the hell out.

“Their skin was earthy, I guess, but they all looked kind of sick. I didn’t see more than a few of them out there, but...what *are* they?”

“I’m only guessing, Mr. Slave, but I think they might be ogres. And if you see one ogre, there are probably thirty others hiding nearby.”

Mari nodded. “Yeah. Their species hunts in packs and migrates constantly. If you saw some out there, I bet the rest of the pack—or at least some other families—are somewhere close.”

That assessment made me wince. Thirty ogres for every one you saw? Damn, they were like huge, ripped cockroaches! “What should we do? I did find a water source, but we should bolt, right?”

“Definitely. They’re going to have much better weapons than a pack of kobolds. If nothing else, their level of cultural development is a whole lot closer to ours than those little monkeys’,” said Mari.

“Huh. For some reason I had the impression ogres weren’t really that powerful. What are they like?”

“Picture it like this: during human evolution in this world, it’s like ogres evolved along a different branch from modern humans.”

“So they’re kind of living Neanderthals or something.”

Mari drew her broad-bladed longsword from its sheath to check its condition. There were a ton of nicks in the blade, but you could tell her sword had been forged with an emphasis on durability. It would do the job, but...I pointed to a part of the sword about twelve inches from the tip, where the blade wasn’t so damaged.

“Mari, use this part when you cut. And when you’re defending against someone’s blow, you should use the flat of the blade. That’ll keep your sword in better shape.”

“When did you become an expert?”

“Well, y’know, I’ve got experience with stage combat.”

Back when I was learning it, a long-time instructor showed me a beloved wooden training sword of his, one called a “bokken.” That’s the same thing they call the wooden swords actors use in samurai stories too, sometimes. Not that they’re different enough to justify having two different words for the same thing, but that’s, uh, how jargon works. I guess. Wait, what was I talking about again?

Oh yeah—the instructor’s bokken was chipped from the blows it had parried, but all the dings were concentrated in exactly the same place. That was evidence he could repel blows and parry more accurately than others. He also parried strikes with the flat of his blade, keeping the damage to a minimum.

“You might not be able to do it at first, but it’s something to keep in mind. Just remind yourself to do it, and soon you’ll build the muscle memory to pull it off.”

And since we didn’t know how many enemies we were about to face, all the more reason to put in that little extra effort. After all, those ogres were big. Any sword would get pretty beat up trying to cut through those bones. Why not get some practice in?

“Should we turn back, or push forward and attack them?”

“Let’s turn back,” said Yoi. “If we get closer to Bulka, we’ll have a much better chance!”

We nodded. Yoi picked up our scaled little baby in the middle of his heated battle with a dead snake, and Mari fell in behind her. As if by habit, I took up the rear guard.

As we went, I pulled off my tattered poncho and tied it on like a loincloth. I didn’t think I was going to have much need for a poncho going forward, and I sure as hell didn’t want it sticking to my arms or chest and distracting me during a fight.

With a mace in my right hand and a shortsword in my left, I was a flawless image of martial readiness. If an attack came from the right, from the left, from wherever—I was ready.

Still, I couldn’t help but be grateful that we weren’t looking at any more basilisks. And yeah, ogres weren’t great, but they were really just extra-large humans. Sure, that meant their strength was on par with a gorilla’s, but that only mattered if they could hit me.

Which reminded me—next time my young mistress let me get equipment, I was gonna ask for a shield. Yeah, that would be good. I’d fought two basilisks in a row with nothing but bravado to protect me, and my body ached all over.

At least I was still hopped up on a strength potion; I probably would have toppled over from exhaustion without it. We were lucky, now that I thought about it. Maybe we could make a clean escape after all.

I moved swiftly through the open field with my party, the grass rippling in the wind...and, stumbling through the dense forest of broad-leaved trees and toward the road, we ran right into some ogres.

Just like that, we went from a party of heroes to a gaggle of damsels.

Into that nervous silence, Mari howled: “It’s the ogres! *Charge!*”

Her order echoed over the sun-dappled battleground.

And, like true adventurers, we shifted gears from brief panic to a full-on attack.

Back when I was doing karate, my motivation would crumble the moment my practice partner landed an unexpected blow. But when our lives are in real danger, humans are pretty good at snap decisions.

It was no surprise that Gangi Mari the Templar leapt into action, but Yoi was just as nimble—she'd hardly set the baby basilisk on the ground before she was casting a spell out of her grimoire. She was clearly ready for a surprise attack, and had put a bookmark in her tome of magic to save time...and to get the first hit in.

“In the words of the ancient spellcasters: Physical, magical, fireball!”

Tiny Yoi recited her usual spell and drew a sigil, then unleashed a blazing beam of light.

In total, seven ogres had the misfortune of wandering into us. I thought it might have been the same group I saw by the river earlier, but it turned out to be a different bunch. I sort of wished it was the other group—there was a female ogre with these guys, carrying a child in her arms. Maybe this was the core of the tribe. Plus, there was something much more human about their faces compared to all the other creatures I'd fought so far. That was probably another reason this felt so...difficult.

But my young mistress didn't hesitate for a second, sending the heads of these ogres—who looked like the very definition of noncombatants—flying with a single blow.

It was pretty grisly stuff. Just a few moments later, the fireball floating over Mari's left hand ripped right into a powerful-looking warrior.

We wiped them out almost instantly. Good start, but now we needed to put some distance between us and the scene of the crime. We couldn't afford to have the rest of the group come down on us.

Feeling a lot queasier about this than when we'd faced the kobolds, I launched into the fray, and right then, one of the ogres swung at me.

Of course I got the one with a sword! It was a kind of longsword, this world's

favorite blade, although it didn't look like a good fit for him. Hell, he didn't seem to know a thing about swordsmanship. He was just swinging it around, relying on brute strength.



I leapt forward a little more aggressively, hoping I could take the guy down with one hit after seeing how heroically the other members of my party had fought. He swiped at me head on. I turned the blow aside with my shortsword, then swung my mace up at his face.

Bone crunched. Next target. I turned to face the ogre Yoi was attacking, but she didn't need me worrying about her. She slammed another fireball into her assailant.

Yeah, Yoi's fireballs made Mari's look like sparklers, and she could let 'em fly like machine gun bullets. Maybe the spell she was using now was just weaker than what she used to blast that atomic cannonball at the basilisk, or maybe she was taking some extra time to prepare it—no clue. All I knew was that her firepower was a hell of a relief.

With that out of the way, I leapt at the last remaining ogre. It was fighting Mari, so its back was turned. Knowing I only had one chance to get this right, I thrust my shortsword deep into its back. Panicked, it tried to turn to look at me. That's what you get for letting your guard down, ogre-dude. It lurched to face me with its last bit of strength, and I cracked it in the head with a backhanded chop of my mace.

The ogre crumpled. I turned to see Mari cutting down another, which fell to its knees before toppling limp in a pool of blood.

"Is that all of them?" Mari panted.

"Gammd oomanng!"

Just as she spoke, more ogres poured out of the woods. Five of them this time.

"Damn it! Don't let your guard down—there's more of them!" I lunged forward, throwing myself into the middle of the group, trying not to get all weak-kneed just because we were fighting something that looked so much like us.

The horror and grief clogging my lungs evaporated as I once again raised my mace high overhead and steeled myself to fight.

“Gomm! Gomm!”

The ogre speech was too hard to understand, but it didn't sound like they were inviting us back to their cozy cave for tea. I charged at the five new ogres, not allowing myself a moment's thought or hesitation. Thankfully, the group stayed clumped together. I think they were just as surprised by us as we were by them.

I'd done martial arts for a long time, but all of that work focused on one-on-one barehanded fighting. In contrast, I only studied stage combat for maybe five years in my whole life, but I'd learned a few things from it all the same.

For example, one time I played a medieval foot soldier in a scene where an army breaks through a castle gate. We rehearsed those scenes over and over again, but for some reason, when it was time for the live take, everyone would start holding their spears upside down, get scared by the cavalymen on their own side, run into each other and fall over, all kinds of stuff. Sometimes a fight partner just wouldn't show up and everything would descend into chaos. You couldn't prepare for an experience like that with a couple years of karate under your belt, or by being a big bookworm about history and all that junk.

Another thing: When recreating mass battles, those of us who were supposed to get killed by other actors diligently practiced how to hold our weapons. When we raised our weapons over our heads, we had to pay attention to whether our sword was pointed up or if it was hanging down behind us. When we were in close quarters, we had to be sure we were in our “ready” stance, each of our swords held straight up in front of one shoulder. I never expected stage combat to be useful when I came to this fantasy world and started fighting bands of kobolds and whatever, but, uh. I also never expected to come to a fantasy world and start fighting bands of kobolds and whatever. Life is complicated.

Finally, there was the issue of fighting with two weapons. I was under the impression it fell out of use because it wasn't very practical in an actual battle, but stunt fighters who were going after lead roles in period pieces got pretty intense about studying two-handed forms and stances. Only a couple featured actors are allowed to do two-handed stuff, but it looks sick as hell, so tons more people practice it just for fun. Some practice swinging their bokken one-handed

just in case they get the call one day.

My (extremely sick as hell) two-handed style was at that moment a mace in my right hand and a shortsword in my left.

I flattened my body to one side as I ran toward the group, then sprang into the crowd. They weren't in battle mode yet, and *crack*—one hit sent two to the ground. With their guards down, I aimed for wherever would cause the most pain. It paid off.

I tucked and rolled away from the group. A moment later, Mari's longsword cut down the two ogres I set up. Using the momentum of the roll to push myself back to my feet, I took a sec to swallow how weird this all felt and stabbed at one ogre's ribs before bashing it with my mace.

One more down, two left.

Yoi's beam seared into one of them from a little distance away, and Mari finished off the last, skewering it on her longsword.

"Nngah gittra...ungh..." the last ogre murmured with one last, ragged breath.

The last of my strength evaporated. Taking another quick sweep to make sure there were no more ogres, I let myself fall to my knees.

Mari turned. "Shooter, are you hurt?"

"No. You?"

"I'm fine..."

The two of us exchanged a look and struggled to get our breathing back to normal. The same look of exhaustion came over Yoi's face.

"I have some unfortunate news," she told us in a quiet voice. "I won't be able to cast any spells for a little while."

"You've done enough. Your spells were as devastating as I've ever seen them," Mari assured her.

"In order to get a spell off with no preparation, I have to concentrate a little more and increase the magical power."

"Gotcha. We should get out of here. Now. Bring the baby."

I coaxed my shaking knees straight—careful, easy does it, Shuta—and pushed myself back to my feet. Mari was in such bad shape that she was using her longsword to prop herself up. The baby basilisk pecked at the corpse of an ogre with his toothless beak, trying to break off a morsel to eat.

“You shouldn’t eat those things,” I mumbled. “They’re unsanitary. C’mon, let’s go.” I picked the baby up in my arms and surveyed the scrub forest. There couldn’t be any more ogres, right? *Right?*

The mace Yoi had bestowed on me wasn’t exactly complicated, and now I knew how to use it. My shortsword sure wasn’t letting me down; I was stabbing with the best of ’em. But the last issue was my physical strength, and that...that was running low.

Meanwhile, Mari bore the title of Templar, and she could really prove she’d earned it in battle. You’d never suspect she used to just be a high school student. But the same couldn’t be said for little Yoi. She tottered along feebly, moving like a wraith. I wished I could carry her, but I wasn’t doing much better. All I could do was hold her little hand in my mine, and it felt like her grip was going to slip at any second. She was drained. *We* were drained. One more attack and it was gonna be a party wipe.

We tromped across the field in the gathering darkness, and I tried not to think about something so awful. That couldn’t happen. We’d be fine.

Reality was not quite so kind.

We finally found a spot where we could rest right before the sun sank completely below the horizon. We were on a riverbank. Our thirst overpowered the knot of fear curdling our stomachs and we guzzled water from the river. Like before, I turned over some nearby stones and found some snakes, which we then grilled up and ate.

They were rat snakes. I was sure they had some cool fantasy name in this world, but a rat snake was a rat snake, nasty smelling and nastier tasting.

I barely finished my meal before conking right out.

At some point, Mari, who was assigned the first watch, came and woke me

up. “Ogres incoming.”

What was I supposed to do about more ogres after hitting peak fatigue? That last battle had pushed my exhaustion levels over the top. In a mixed haze of drowsiness and alertness, I couldn’t summon anything to say to Mari. I would need all my energy just to get up.

“I don’t know how they figured out where we went,” she continued.

“Are you sure they’re not going to stick to the river?”

Despite our exhaustion earlier, we’d made sure to get closer to the main road before we laid down, hoping the threat of more foot traffic would dissuade our foes from coming back for us.

“It would be odd for them to still be on our trail. Ogres usually do everything they can to avoid humans. They might attack villages or settlements sometimes, but even then they’re usually about grabbing loot and getting out.”

“Could be something has them desperate, then. Maybe they ran into something crazy.”

What if the basilisks had scared the ogres off and now they were fleeing somewhere new? It could’ve been anything. We weren’t that far from where we’d seen the first group. The dungeon might have another exit, and the basilisk parents could’ve grabbed some of the ogres to feed their kids. Now the ogres were hightailing it away from there, hoping to find somewhere else to live...and stumbling right into us.

So many fun possibilities. I pushed myself up to sit and asked, “Where are they?”

“I saw some fires upstream. Probably torches.”

“Wait, what? Those things know how to use fire?”

Then again, the ogres we ran into had carried typical longswords. Made enough sense, I guess. But if they were clever enough to wield fire too, the situation was a whole lot worse than I’d imagined.

Mari sighed. “Don’t be fooled. They’re not related to kobolds or giant apemen. They may be troglodytes, but they’re far more closely related to

humans.”

“Cool, great. Shit. Can you wake up Miss Yoi? We should put some distance between us and them before they realize we’re here.”

“Will do. Are we taking the baby?”

“Might as well, we’ve brought it this far. Doesn’t make much difference if we leave it here or take it with us. How much farther is it to the road again...?”

“Ordinarily, I’d just assume we could make it to the road. But right now? I’m not so sure.”

We’d pushed ourselves hard to gain a little distance, even through our fatigue. There was a real chance we might not have the strength to walk all the way to the road that led to Bulka, a journey that had taken us barely half a day not a week before. Not to mention, we’d battled a whole lot of ogres in a whole lot of places, so there was no guarantee we even really knew where we were. We might find our way back to the wrong road, or get the right one and head in the wrong direction.

It would still help if we could make it to *a* road, any road. A road meant settlements, which would give us a chance to get away from the ogres, at least if we were lucky and stumbled on one with enough hunters to fend off our pursuers.

“Yoi? I’m sorry, but you need to wake up. There are ogres coming our way.”

“Okay, partner. I figured that might happen. Time to go, little guy.”

“*Kwee?*”

And so we started walking once more, none of us speaking a word, taking with us only the clothes on our backs (and not even that, in some cases). Yoi’s frilly dress was unrecognizable, caked in dirt and splatters of blood. The surface of Mari’s reinforced leather armor was all nicked up and her sleeveless dress, which had once been white, was now covered in mud. Then there was me in the back, with nothing but a tattered poncho for a loincloth. With the mace in my hand, I probably looked like a caveman. Me am Shooter. Me gobble you up!

It seemed like those damn ogres hadn’t zeroed in on us yet, but that meant

we had to stay sneaky to keep it that way. No running, no lighting torches. Just slow, steady progress.

I was at the rear of the group and turned back to check the situation again and again. Each time, the bobbing lights of the ogres' torches drew closer and continued to grow in number.

They were gonna get us. I was sure of it. Well, all right. Fine. Let's do this, then. Not that I was motivated by some kind of chivalry; it was just that if I didn't get myself psyched up, I didn't think I'd be able to save Yoi or Mari.

I was planning to act as a decoy to allow them to escape, me and my little baby basilisk. Poor little guy. Well, he was going to have to come with me, no buts about it. Anyone carrying the baby would just get slowed down by his weight.

I would've liked to borrow Mari's broad-bladed longsword for the upcoming confrontation, but then she wouldn't have any weapons herself. And how else would she protect Yoi? My little mistress hadn't cast any spells since the last fight, so hopefully she had recovered a tiny bit of power. I just hoped she could launch one last attack if worse came to worst.

Either way, I knew Mari had faced pure horror at the hands of giant apemen in the past, and there was no way I was going to risk her suffering something even worse. That ain't chivalry, not at all. It's basic goddamn decency.

"We should split into two groups," I said finally.

"What are you talking about? We can't split up now!"

"Things are *not* gonna go good for us if we don't. Mari, you keep going this way with Miss Yoi. But stay away from the riverbank."

As soon as I suggested the idea, the two girls turned and stared at me.

"And what are you going to do, Mr. Slave?"

"I'm going to take the baby and flee in a different direction, Miss Yoi. You hear that, kiddo? Your Uncle Shuta is looking out for you," I said as I took the baby basilisk from Yoi.

"Are you expecting gratitude?" Mari asked. "You're choosing this all on your

own.”

“I know. Let’s just pray for the best for each other.”

She snorted. “Hah. And who would two agnostic Japanese people pray to, exactly?”

“To the Holy Virgin Ganjamaru, of course.”

One last little gibe, then we went our separate ways. I was pretty sure Mari had figured out my plan. Her face was always set in an expression of grim determination, but when I proposed this idea, she looked a little startled. Man, this is the kind of noble deed that Japanese people just eat up. “The spirit of sacrifice to save your friends.” No wonder she was into it.

Not that I had any intention of dying here.

Crouching down in the darkness, I started moving in the opposite direction from Mari and Yoi in order to lure the ogres in my footsteps.

“I’m sorry to do this to you, kiddo,” I whispered to the basilisk, trying to give the baby a few last words of advice. “I hope you can make a life for yourself after this is over. You’re too young to have to go through this shit, but you’re going to have to stand on your own two feet. A man doesn’t complain. He gets a job. Pulls himself up by his bootstraps. Uh. Scale...straps.”

He just cocked his head and squeaked out, “*Kweeee?*”

Guess he didn’t understand. But hey, why would he? And anyway, a kobold or a wolf or something might find and kill him in short order. Or maybe the ogres would gank us both. Or maybe—just maybe, with a little luck—we could get out of this and have a cold one.

“Okay, little guy. Uncle Shuta’s going away now.”

I set the baby basilisk on the ground and walked into the darkness, leaving him behind.

So there was this apparel shop, right, and my manager was an ex-paratrooper in the Self-Defense Force. The shop mainly sold military outfits and equipment. I never know how I should explain it to people when they ask, so I just say I

worked at an apparel shop.

It was actually pretty shady. The most talented shot in the whole army did airsoft gun customizations there, and people who looked like they'd walked straight out of a war movie and claimed they used to be in the Signal Corps were always hanging around. Because of that, we would do airsoft combat games "in the field" on our days off, and night after night we played at night battles in a dried-up riverbed.

But even after all of that, it was still an apparel shop. The main product we carried was military uniforms. Fatigues and combat uniforms were the highest sellers. We even offered discounts on rappelling classes, outdoor raid classes, and even nighttime marching drills.

Still, I couldn't help but be grateful for all those experiences. Sure, it was never anything more than a side job where I could pretend to die dramatically in the line of fire, but it *had* given me a teeny bit of real-life experience with make-believe battlefields.

There's nothing like a little late-night airsoft to give you the tactical espionage experience you need for a situation like this. It was time to melt into the shadows. It was time for mind games. It was time to become one with the night.

After leaving the baby, I stalked the ogres for a few minutes. I waited until about half the line of ogres walked past me. Closer. Almost. Just right.

When I was right in the middle of the moving pack, I suddenly yelled, "Looking for me? Well, I'm right here. *And* I'm buck naked, so don't even try to hide behind your clothes! Take it off and take me on!"

I'd left my poncho-loincloth somewhere behind me, not wanting it to get caught in the bush or make a noise. Some situations demand nudity.

"Sa:p; eoTFCP zas@ pefzko!"

One of the ogres shouted some impossible-to-pronounce gibberish, then pointed at me with a roar. One after another, the ogres whipped out their weapons and rushed toward me.

Perfect.

I disappeared into the shadows. Taking a quick look around, I counted more than ten ogres. If I were a maverick shogun, I might be able to beat them all, but I was just a naked past-prime dude with a sword. My only chance was to take them on one by one. I'd trick one, kill it, and work through the pack that way.

One of the ogres passed by, swiveling his head back and forth as he searched for me. Too late, bucko—I crawled out of a clump of tall grass, stood up behind him, and...

"Good evening, sir, and goodbye!" I roared, and *bam*. Done. Well, not *done*. Another ogre was coming at me, so I melted back into the tall grass. This ogre had a torch, so he'd probably seen me kill his buddy just now. He bellowed at another ogre and fell to his knees beside the corpse.

"My condolences, but you left yourself open!"

I whacked the mace into the back of the ogre's head. The strike sent a reverberation through my arm as it crushed the ogre's skull—a sensation that stuck with me, and still does.

I withdrew into the shrubbery once again in an effort to scatter the gathering crowd of ogres. I snuck toward the group on my hands and knees, still hidden by the grass, but—oh, shit—blithely pushed my head out through a break in the thicket and straight into the open.

Face-to-face with a very large ogre.

I done goofed.

Cool fact about longswords: When a giant has a longsword (like, for instance, a huge murderous ogre), it gives the illusion of a regular person holding a shortsword. Neat, huh? So when the ogre swung his longsword up over his head, it looked nearly weightless, and right at that moment I decided to say hello.

Because, you know, it's always important to say hello when you meet someone for the first time. "Hey there. Having a good night? W-well, bye!"

Goodbye, everyone. Goodbye, Mom.

I was suffused with the strange and noble feeling that comes with putting up a fight until you just can't stand anymore.

Gazing up at the ogre's raised longsword, I felt the same moment of realization I got in karate competitions right before I lost. Man, this was it. This was going to be the hit that killed me. I just knew it. And hey, getting my head sliced off in a single swing might even be a better way to go than death by karate.

But I didn't close my eyes. Because right then, I saw something in the darkness, faintly illuminated by the starlight, wheeling overhead as I faced my imminent death: I saw an arrow pierce the ogre right in the neck.

Good thing I didn't look away.

"Well, look at that. I'm saved." Obviously, I couldn't figure out what had happened right then, but I did realize I had to move fast. Somehow, I was still alive.

It felt like I was using the last of my strength to push myself up from the ground. Got my mace. Got my shortsword. And got some stranger now, too, joining the fight between me and the ogres.

I scrambled to my feet and scanned the area; there were five ogres in my immediate vicinity. Where the hell had they come from?! They just kept popping up! I didn't know much about the ogres, but including the guys I'd killed, there had to be over fifty in the area at least. Maybe they were all still nearby, shouting at each other in that impossible-to-understand language, bellowing for war from every direction.

I followed the trajectory the arrow had come from. Something gleamed in the shadows, caught for a moment in the moonlight; another arrow flew out and pierced the chest of the ogre standing closest to me.

The bow was so strong that the arrow shot straight through the ogre's chest and out the other side, lodging in the ground.

Was there someone besides Nishka the Scalesplitter who was that skilled with a bow?

But there was no time to stand there in shock. I channeled one final burst of

energy into recovering my grip strength and tensing my limbs, which had gone almost completely limp since the start of the fight, and closed in on the ogres right next to me.

There were two of them. Under normal circumstances, I might've been scared and had trouble even launching into a fair fight. But strangely, now that I was at my physical limit, the adrenaline overpowered any lingering fears of violence. I pushed myself a half-step further than usual.

"You lookin' for a fight?" I snarled. "'Cause I'm over here!"

The ogre was confounded by this new enemy hurtling out of the darkness—at which point I stabbed my shortsword into its chest.

It wasn't enough. I must've missed the vital organs. Worse yet, it felt like the tip of my shortsword was bumping into one of the ogre's bones. I quickly let go.

Too slow. The wounded ogre dropped its weapon—something spear-like—but still managed to hurl a brutal punch at me with its raw strength.

Struggling to hold onto my mace, I stumbled. I managed to absorb the blow and replied by swinging my mace at the ogre's face...just as another ogre came up behind me and slashed at my back.

Quickly switching my position, I knocked my new opponent's sword hand away with my mace, but the ogre was so pissed that it just punched me with its other hand.

I felt like a boxer ten rounds in with no end in sight.

I swept my mace in a long arc and thought I landed a solid hit on my opponent's arm, but the ogre didn't even seem to notice. It leapt to tackle me. I shifted my center of gravity, took his momentum, and used it to toss the bastard backwards over my shoulder.

Shortsword, shortsword—there it was. I snatched it up and leaned over the fallen ogre, but he kicked me away. Now I was the one crumpled on my hands and knees.

Damn it, where was that shortsword now?

At that moment, my unknown ally moved like a burst of wind and hurled

themselves into the ogre. I couldn't tell for sure, but it looked like they got in a hit with a knife or sword, too.

The giant fell heavily to the earth and then, at last, I let my eyelids flutter closed in exhaustion.

"Hey, you okay there, bud? We've got a man down over here!"

"Was one of the adventurers wounded?"

"Not sure. He's got the tag on his neck, but I didn't see him at the briefing. Hey, wake up! Are you hurt?"

"Hold on a second—you're Shooter! You're gonna be okay, buddy—"

Their voices sounded far away to me, but they were human. Hearing them made me smile. Somewhere nearby, I heard the metal-on-metal sound of swords clashing.

Whoever they were or wherever they'd come from, they'd just saved my life.

Thank you so much, I thought. Truly, I thank you.

Flooded with relief, I lost consciousness.

When I woke up, I had no idea how much time had passed. My muscles were dog-tired. Struggling to open my eyes and see where I was, I found that even my eyelids were exhausted. I could make out the peaked ceiling of a tent and flickering lights—maybe from lanterns or something? And then I saw the single eye staring down at me.

"Well, if it isn't Nishka! Haven't seen you in a while."

"Sh-Shooter! You're awake!"

"Mmm, my head feels so comfortable. Nishka, is my head resting on your lap? It's nice. Your lap is so soft..."

"What are you talkin' about?! First you up and disappear without a word, and now I find you all torn up. What happened?"

"Look, it all led me back to you, didn't it?"

My muscles were so drained that I could barely move, but at least my head felt nice. Such comfy thighs. Was this a dream?

“Whatever. I guess it worked out.”

“Where are we, anyway? Is this heaven?”

“Don’t be stupid. We’re in a tent.”

“Oh. It feels like I’m dreaming, but you’re telling me I’m actually awake. That’s a relief. It’s safe to sleep. To sleep...”

“Y-yeah. Sleep, sleep! Ya gotta get your strength back.”

“Thank you, Nishka. I greatly...appreciate...”

I closed my eyes again.

Now I could relax and actually *sleep*. Just dozing off wasn’t enough. Human beings need real rest, not just unconsciousness.

The next time I awoke, there were seven eyes staring down at me: Nishka the Scalesplitter, Gangi Mari’s acorn-like goggle-eyes, and my master, Yoi. Next to them all was the baby basilisk.

Okay, *was* this a dream? I blinked several times and lolled my head to look around at everyone again. Nope. Seemed real, and I didn’t feel particularly dead, even if everything hurt. Maybe I was coming down from the strength potion too, on top of everything else.

“Wow,” I mumbled. “You sure I didn’t go to heaven? You all look so lovely.”

“Mr. Slave? Look, everyone! Mr. Slave is awake!” Yoi cried. “Are you okay?”

“Kwee?”

“You certainly took your time waking up,” Mari sniffed. “Might as well have died if you were going to take so long. Hmph!”

“You had us worried there, Shooter,” said Nishka. “You’ve been asleep a whole day. We’re about to break camp, so you better get movin’!”

“R-right.” My body wasn’t obeying me at all, which I guessed meant there was more wrong with me than just the side effects of a potion. There were bandages all over my body. “Can someone help me sit up...?”

Good ol' voluptuous Nishka held out her arm to help me up.

"Thanks."

"No problem."

How much had they told each other? Nishka and Yoi, who wore an expression of relief, exchanged a look. Mari was the only one glowering straight at me.

"I didn't think I was gonna run into you here," said Nishka. "You surprised me!"

"Well, you surprised me, too. The first time I woke up and saw you, I thought I was dreaming. Or that maybe I'd died and gone to the good place."

"Who are these two chicks, anyway? They said you were guarding them out in the grassland there, but then they came looking for you and joined up with us."

"Kwee kweee!"

"Th-they did? Miss Yoi, Gangi Mari, I hope I haven't caused you too much trouble."

"Hey," Nishka broke in, "Why d'ya keep sayin' 'miss'? Why're you talkin' to this kid all polite-like?"

"It's a long story. Long story short, I, uh, I ended up getting enslaved..."

"You're a slave?"

"I went to the city gates with Gimul and was on my way back to the inn when I got into some trouble..."

"Seriously? Whaddya mean you 'got into trouble'?"

"Oh, well, some adventurers who looked like thugs jumped me and beat the crap out of me. Said I broke an expensive vase, demanded I pay them back for it, and capped it off by saying that it was worth a fortune. Which, come on, I wasn't born yesterday, but I was in no position to argue."

"You're sayin' the number one fighter from our village got taken out by a bunch of street thugs? Aren't you supposed to be a warrior?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you."

“Kwee!”

Nishka looked disgusted and eyed Yoi. My young mistress flashed a smile at Nishka in greeting, as if she had been waiting for this introduction. She must’ve been worried about me, but at least I didn’t have to worry about her. Yoi looked energetic and rested up. I hated seeing her so pale.

“Hello! I bought Mr. Slave. My name is Yoi’hady Jumei.”

“Huh. Okay, then. I’m Nishka the Scalesplitter. I’m from a settlement out on the frontier in Apegut. Shooter n’ me are hunters for the village. What about you, what’s your deal?”

“A pleasure to meet you. I’m Gangi Mari, a Templar working for the Order of Templars in Bulka.”

Mari reeled in her usual prickliness and bowed demurely to Nishka. Look at her, acting polite when she felt like it. Made Mari kinda cute, actually. Maybe she’d even qualify as beautiful if she could just be nice for more than thirty-two seconds.

“Wow, a Templar, huh? So the two of you are Shooter’s masters now?”

“Not quite,” said Mari. “Yoi is his actual owner. I’m more like their adventuring companion.”

I didn’t mind the way she shyly called me her “adventuring companion,” either. That was the first time she actually acknowledged me as a colleague, and the cute little way she averted her eyes was the cherry on top. Amazing.

Nishka looked back at me. “Does that mean you registered as an adventurer, Shooter?”

I told her everything—how we set out from Bulka to storm a nearby dungeon that had been a holy site for the ancients, how we found basilisks there, the works. I made sure to throw in the part where we thought we’d taken one down, only to realize it was part of a breeding pair and their eggs were starting to hatch—that was wild. Onto fleeing the dungeon, running smack-dab into some ogres, running a whole lot more, and finally ending up here.

“Can’t say things have been goin’ so great for me either, Shooter. I was

workin' as an adventurer while I looked for you. I couldn't find you anywhere, so I had no idea what I was gonna do next..." Nishka mussed her hair in embarrassment.

"I-I'm sorry I worried you so much."

"You should be! I didn't even have any money for food! Luckily, ogres started poppin' up at nearby villages, so I got recruited for an urgent ogre-hunting quest. There were so many of 'em that they sent out hunting parties, day after day after day. I was getting nowhere with my other salary, so I figured I'd join up."

"And that's how you wound up outside Bulka."

"Yup. Everyone's using borrowed weapons, the ogres are armed, and the whole thing's been a huge pain in the ass. We set up our base camp here, but we're just clearing out the last of 'em now."

So they were wrapping up their quest and were about to break camp...which meant if I kept lying here, I'd just cause even more trouble for everyone. Good thing I woke up.

"Were there lots and lots of ogres, Miss Elf?"

"I mean, it looked like a whole tribe was in the middle of migrating. So there were maybe two hundred of 'em? Maybe a few less."

"T-two hundred?!" Yoi was shocked by Nishka's words, but Nishka herself didn't seem to think there was anything all that surprising about it.

"Ogres are always buildin' settlements out on the frontier where we come from. Humans would probably think of them as full-blown villages. The guild said there was an extra reward for whoever got the most heads, so I was psyched, honestly. But once we found you, I couldn't just run off and leave you. Which is gonna cost me a lot of money, y'know! Hmph!"

She let out a long sigh, causing her breasts to bounce fetchingly at me. Exquisite. Man, I'd missed feeling that way. Nishka was always insulting me, but deep down I got the feeling she didn't hate me at all.

She peered at me for a moment, then continued, "If you're feelin' better,

then I'm good to go..."

"I appreciate you looking out for me."

"Yeah, sure, whatever. Where'd you find this fat little frilled lizard, anyhow? When we found you passed out on the ground, he was right next to you, so we brought him along. What's his deal? 'Cause he won't stop eating, and we're running out of stuff to feed him."

"Oh, him? He's a basilisk."

"Oh wow, a basi...a basi...wait up, he's a *what*?" Nishka did a double take.

"Weren't you listening?" said Mari. "When we faced the second adult basilisk, the eggs started hatching. And we've gone to a lot of trouble to bring this baby back to the adventurer's guild with us to prove we got the job done."

After thanking the band of ogre-hunting adventurers, we left the base camp and returned to the town of Bulka.

"Now that I'm getting another look at it from outside, the walls seem so huge. And look—you can see marks where they've had battles in the past. That's so cool."

"Yup," Mari replied. "This place is on the front line for battles against all the tribal folk living out on the frontier. You never heard that? In this land, the highest-ranked military aristocrats inherit the role of 'earl martial' and defend the borders."

"Oh yeah, I think I read about that in a book somewhere. It said that earls in command of border defense weren't considered regular earls; they were more on the level of a marquis in terms of authority and wealth, or something like that?"

"You know a lot for a college dropout."

"He he he. Sorry to disappoint. I was enrolled in the history department. I've read tons of history surveys for a bunch of different places."

As the party walked along in our usual marching order, I stared up at the castle gate. Mari frowned at me with a disbelieving expression on her face.

“Well,” she said, “that puts you in a whole new light.”

“Meaning what?”

I started to suspect that Mari only seemed like she was always glaring at me, and that her glower was actually just her default expression. She must’ve spent ages cultivating a resting badass face. But I was glad that I was starting to see glimmers of how she truly felt peeking out behind the edges of her words. It made me happy to think that she might actually think of me as more of an equal, even if just a tiny bit.

“So, Nishka,” Mari pivoted. “You’re used to cities? Good to hear! I thought you might say something like ‘Tarnation, I reckon there’s more people here than a whole herd o’ deer!’”

“Hey, don’t make fun of me! I’m Nishka the Scalesplitter! I’ve taken down wyverns. You think a bunch of humans are ever going to scare me?”

“Good point. A hunter needs to be adaptable in order to do her job. Otherwise you wouldn’t be able to study new prey and figure them out.”

“He he he. Exactly!”

I felt like I was starting to understand how to handle Nishka, too. Nishka took a huge amount of pride in being a hunter, so if someone flattered her about it, it put her in a great mood.

Of course, Nishka really was a first-rate hunter. She was pretty tall for a lady, and she was absolutely shredded. It took a lot more strength than usual to draw her bow, but she made it look as easy as picking her teeth. She could even stick some wind magic on her arrows to get high-accuracy knockout shots.

Even now, bouncing the baby basilisk in her arms, Nishka was dedicated to her craft. “And what’s your weakness? Huh?” she asked him in an annoyed grumble.

The baby was getting sandwiched between her enormous breasts and was struggling to get away. Lucky little reptile.

“So, the plan is to get back to the adventurer’s guild and file a report, right, Miss Yoi?” I asked.

“That’s right, Mr. Slave! The guild records originally said that a basilisk was rumored to be in the dungeon. Some adventurers who ventured nearby heard it roar.”

“I see. And what did the request say?”

“Oh, that’s simple, Mr. Slave! It wanted someone to defeat the basilisk who’d taken over as master of the dungeon. But there were actually two of them, and they had babies with them.”

“They sure did.”

“So, Mr. Slave, either we team up with some more people and go back out to kill the other basilisks, or we simply report the situation to the guild and move on.”

“And which are you planning to do?”

“I’m not really sure.” Yoi’s hand was clasped in mine, and she looked up at me as she thought the question over.

A new fighting force, huh? Like how the village hired a bunch of adventurers experienced in slaying dragon-like beasts to help out against the wyvern. I thought those guys were amazing, for sure, but then I remembered how Nishka out planned and outfought every last one of them. Maybe it wasn’t numbers that mattered.

“Do you have any plans for when we get back to Bulka, Nishka?”

“Huh? I’m gonna kick around and have some fun, then head back home. I made enough money on this job to spend some quality time in town.”

“I see. So you don’t have anything in particular scheduled?”

“Nah.”

Perfect. I turned back to Yoi. “If you’re going back to fight the basilisks again, I’d invite Nishka along to help. After all, everyone within miles of our village knows of the magnificent hunter, Nishka the Scalesplitter. Not to mention her vast experience in taking down wyverns. Isn’t that right, Nishka?” I prodded.

“You know it. I’ve hunted as many wyverns as winters have passed since I became a hunter. I’ve never laid eyes on a basilisk before, but if I ever saw one,

I bet I could figure out its weak spots no problem,” Nishka replied with her stock introduction as she swung the baby basilisk up high and back down.

That was exactly what I hoped she would say.

“How does that sound?” I asked. “If you’re planning to hire adventurers anyway, it’s better to not have to split the loot up among too many people.”

“That’s a good point,” said Yoi. “What do you think, Nishka?”

“Sure thing. Not like I’ve got anything better to do.”

“I agree, too,” Mari said.

“Then that’s settled. You sure are smart, Mr. Slave!”

“Thank you so much, truly. I appreciate that,” I said, stroking Yoi’s hair fondly.

The idea had only occurred to me when I considered that we were going to have to wait for the adventurer’s guild to make a call about the dungeon—we couldn’t decide whether to launch another attack without their approval. After all, it wasn’t going to do the guild any good if we got killed. It would kind of suck if we couldn’t give the dungeon another shot, but we couldn’t make any decisions until we knew for sure what was going on.

Eventually, the gate guards came up to us for our bag check.

“Where are you coming from? Do you have any identification?”

“We’re adventurers returning from a dungeon. These two are my friends.”

“Show me your tags...hmph. So that checks out, anyway.”

Mari pulled her adventurer tag out from the collar of her sleeveless dress. The guard leaned in close to peer at her tag, and her face twisted in annoyance. She might have been a man-hater, but she wasn’t about to act out against the authorities.

“We met up with an ogre-hunting party on our way back and they gave us a ride,” I said. “We lost most of our belongings during the fight. All we have left is what we could carry.”

“And you’re a slave? Hey, wait—didn’t I see you before? Oh man, you’re that guy from that little village who wanted work. Ha ha ha! So you went broke and

had to go into slavery, huh? That's rough, buddy."

"Th-thanks for remembering me. Hey! That hurts! Please don't pull on my belly-button ring!"

"Hmph. And your master's this baby girl?"

"Yup! I'm Mr. Slave's master. I paid thirty Bulka gold coins for him!" Yoi gave the guard a massively inflated price. I guessed it must be a custom here to brag about how much you paid for your slaves.

The guard tugged on my belly-button piercing and peered at it suspiciously. "This bare-assed whelp cost thirty gold coins?"

I showed him the adventurer tag that hung from my neck, but the guard just waved it off. "I don't need to see that."

The guy didn't want to do any work for me, but he did a real thorough job with Yoi. What, was the guy into goblin lolis or something? This dirtbag was inventing whole new levels of sick.

"I-Is there some sort of problem, sir?" Mari asked.

"I've gotta search her so I can *find out* if there's a *problem* or not."

"Hey—"

Yoi clung to my arm, scared.

Nishka fixed the guard with a menacing glare. There was the glint of a wyvern-slayer in her eyes. "Someone oughta teach you to quit groping every girl that comes through here."

"Hold on there, lady! This is my job."

"Aww, is it? You think I won't kill you, ya girl-diddling creep? Do you have any idea how many ogres we just cut into little pieces? I dunno about these guys, but I'm still amped up and ready to go another round. And hey, how convenient, you're already as ugly and stupid-lookin' as an ogre. I might just give into some *muscle memory* if you don't get this pat-down over *yesterday*."

"Um, th-thank you all for your cooperation. Everything looks good here!"

When Nishka undid the top button of her blouse and pulled her adventurer

tag out from between her breasts, the guard took a quick glance at it and his face went pale. His eyes darting reluctantly back to look at her, the guard moved on to the next group's bag check. You could almost feel bad for the creep...

Still, there was a long line of hunting parties behind us, and we needed to get that line moving...because the ogre-hunting party behind us was guarding a cart loaded with rows and rows of ogre heads. The heads in the cart all had tags nailed to their foreheads so it would be obvious at a glance whose team killed which of the giants. The heads of the ogres our party killed were piled in among them. The leader in charge of the hunting party had talked with Nishka and kindly agreed to tag them so we could collect the heads later.

"Wow, th-that's a lot of ogre heads!"

"And we didn't even get all of 'em. The ones running the raids at night are probably still out there," Nishka said, whacking the scabbard of her machete and flashing the guard a ferocious grin.

"Oh," the guard muttered, reminding me a little of a small Chihuahua. "You, uh, don't say!"

When Nishka got like this, there was no denying she looked like a hardened veteran from a band of lawless adventurers. But what else could you expect from the greatest hunter of our village? Her ability to adapt to the needs of a situation was on a whole other level.

"So—if I may, ahem—what you're saying is that your attack on the dungeon was a failure?"

"I'm not sure how you got that from what we said. We were told there was only one basilisk in there, and we came here to report that we found two!"

"Ah, yes, mmhm. And you were able to exterminate the two you found there?"

"Why do you keep *asking* that? We were told about one basilisk, and we killed it! We have this tooth and its tail as proof."

We were at the help desk in the adventurer's guild, where Mari was reporting the situation. I stood back and watched the exchange between Mari and the young man behind the desk, who wore an impressively blank customer-service smile. No matter how clear it became that the guild office had given us inaccurate info, his bland smile never faltered.

"Ah yes, of course. Then these parts here are to be submitted as evidence, correct?"

Mari violently thunked it all onto the table: the giant canine tooth we ripped from the basilisk's maw, the tip of its tail, and its inverted scale. Every one of them had been carefully selected by the guild as necessary harvests to count as proof of a kill. A gigantic basilisk wasn't going to just sit still and let someone pull one of its fangs out, and carving off the tip of its tail would be a no-go, too. The inverted scale was common to all members of the dragon family—wyverns, basilisks, and the like—and came from the creature's throat, around where the Adam's apple was located on humans.

Maybe someone could luck out and find a basilisk diplomatic enough to part with a fang or the tip of its tail, but there was exactly one way to get an inverted scale.

"Oh, I see. That certainly is the inverted scale, a fang, and the tip of the tail. All very well, but—and I'm sure you're aware—that's only enough for one animal. Yes? Yes."

Mari was livid. "Are you kidding me? You know that I belong to the Order of Templars, and yet you're still taking that tone with me?"

"Goodness me, whatever are you referring to? We treat everyone equally here. Why, even a Templar from the esteemed Order of Templars is just another fellow adventurer to our guild. And this particular fellow adventurer has failed to kill their target. The regulations state—as I'm sure you're aware—that when an adventurer fails in this most specific and unfortunate way, said adventurer is required to pay a fine."

On and on their pseudo-dignified back-and-forth went. All the while, my young mistress watched the discussion unfold, looking uneasy. She had the baby basilisk in her lap, bouncing it on one knee and murmuring reassuringly to

it. She stopped, suddenly, and looked up at me. “Maybe I should have talked to them instead.”

“I doubt it would have helped. And you have the very important duty of taking care of the baby.”

“You’re right, Mr. Slave. But that clerk is being so stubborn.”

“I agree.”

“He seems different from everyone else.”

At that, Nishka, who was sitting across from Yoi, cut in. “You ain’t kiddin’. The girl who told me to register as an adventurer was real nice.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah! Here I was, about to sell my scale necklace to buy food, and she convinced me I could get more money throwing in my lot with *these* guys instead. I was starvin’, so I guess I didn’t have a choice.”

“You almost sound proud about being that poor. You’re reflecting badly on our village—don’t make me pretend I don’t know you”

“C’mon, Shooter, don’t give me that look. C’mooonnn...”

Not that I didn’t get that guy’s stubborn customer service shtick after all the jobs I’ve taken. These clerks had to deal with rough-and-tumble adventurers all day long, so he was probably using the right tactic to head off angry armed professionals with a wall of furiously cheerful diplomacy.

But damn it, we’d faced two basilisks, and there was no way we could’ve planned for that with the guild’s bad information. They were the ones responsible for that lack of info, no question about it, so wouldn’t it have been more appropriate for them to pay us a bonus and send us on our way instead of pretending we failed the mission? No one likes to admit they made a mistake at their job, so I kinda got it. But we put our lives on the line! How could we back down after that?

“Let me ask you a question,” said Mari. “What does the guild have to say about the fact that you gave us incorrect information?”

“Incorrect information? Quite the accusation, my friend! The information we

provide may sometimes be a smidge unreliable, but you were contracted to kill a basilisk who was the master of the dungeon. A bounty for one basilisk. That's not in question, is it?"

"That's right, but we're not wrong. We've presented kill trophies for one basilisk. That's the quest. It seems a little odd to me that you don't think we've completed it."

"Mmmmyes, but weren't there two basilisks? In such a situation, we cannot consider the quest successful until they've both been dealt with."

"And we're getting ready to go kill the other one. We even added another person to our party. But if that doesn't matter, *and* we're going to lose money on the quest, then we should be allowed to pay a fine for breach of contract and just drop the whole thing."

I guessed Mari and Yoi weren't pinching pennies here, because Mari was getting really aggressive about it. She started giving me little glances as the debate went on. Wait, was that a "can you believe this guy" look? Then...then did she consider me a friend now? Or no, no—Mari was asking me for help! I swelled with a teensy bit of joy and leapt at the permission to intervene.

The clerk was still smiling in the face of Mari's implications. "I see, I see. Well, if you truly would like to declare a quest failure, all you need to do is sign here. The breach-of-contract fee charged by your religious order is fifteen silver pieces. Do you consent?"

"Before we get to that—" Mari interrupted the smiling clerk as he held the parchment paperwork out to her.

All right, Shooter to bat! I used to have a part-time job working collections at a regional consumer finance company. "Collections" meant it was my job to collect payment on loans. The customers who knew a little bit about the law would always smile and not answer, giving a whole list of half-assed arguments about why they refused to pay. And, of course, we had to make suggestions on how to compromise in order to get the person to pay without making a fuss.

Back then, I didn't have the authority to think something up, so I would ask my boss to take over. He was a tough but smooth-talking negotiator. This time it was on me to do it myself.

“Shooter, bring that baby over here.”

“You got it. If I may, Miss Yoi?”

“Here you go, Mr. Slave!”

The baby basilisk was cleaning himself in Yoi’s lap, but at Mari’s signal, I took him up in my arms and went over to her.

“That’s a good boy. Let’s go say hi to the nice man.”

“Oh my, what a strange and frilly little lizard-thing you have here.”

I set the baby down on the counter. “So you’ve never seen one of these before either, huh?”

“No, I can’t say that I have. I’ve been in charge of the reception desk at the guild for quite some time, but this chubby little chap—why, what an odd little beastie! What is it?”

“His teeth haven’t grown in yet. When he’s this size, he’s just a baby.”

A baby the size of a cat. I stroked his head and tilted his beak open slightly to show the clerk. The basilisk had hatched only a few days ago. He didn’t yet have the jagged teeth of an adult. Next, I made a rumbling noise in my throat, and the baby let out a sweet little “*Kwee! Kwee!*” like a kitten.

“Do you see this here? That’s its inverted scale.”

“How fascinating! I didn’t realize that lizards, too, possessed inverted scales. What a learning experience this is.”

“Can you stop playing dumb for one second? This is a baby basilisk.”

“What, really? Surely you jest.”

“Nope. Back me up here, guys.”

I looked over at Mari and she nodded back. Then I looked over at Nishka, who was sitting next to Yoi.

Nishka snorted disinterestedly but tapped Yoi on the top of her head and stood up.

“This long-eared young lady is Nishka the Scalesplitter. She’s a renowned

wyvern-hunter from Apegut Forest out in the borderlands.”

“Hey there. The name’s Nishka the Scalesplitter.”

“A true pleasure to meet you, my lady golden elf.”

We all glanced at each other.

“She’s a ruthless fighter who has single-handedly taken down as many wyverns as she’s seen winters since she became a hunter. This past spring, she barely broke a sweat taking one out nearly all by herself. Nishka, show him the scale you keep around your neck.”

As I talked up her reputation, Nishka took off the wyvern scale that hung from her neck and set it on the counter. Then she pointed a finger at her eyepatch and said, “This is a memento from killing the wyvern. I gave this eye up as an offering to the Goddess so I would always be able to spot one of those bastards, no matter how high in the sky it’s flying. I know everything there is to know about dragons.”

I’d seen Nishka the Scalesplitter when she’d gotten too into her cups, so I knew she still had two perfectly healthy eyes, but I kept quiet about it. Instead I said, “There. You see, sir?”

“Mm. Very nice, very nice, yes. And...?”

Nishka flashed her white teeth at the man. “This baby basilisk here was just born, hmm...I would say about five days ago. And he already has the inverted scale common to all members of the dragon family. I’d stake my name on it.”

“Indeed?”

Nishka was grinning—she was having way too much fun with this. Now it was my turn to put the squeeze on the guy.

“Do you know what’s going to happen if we abandon the quest to kill these basilisks?”

“I suppose some other party of adventurers will take the quest and will go kill the basilisks?” The clerk smiled ingratiatingly, but he looked faintly puzzled.

“Unfortunately, you’re mistaken about that. Basilisks rule supreme aboveground. Isn’t that true?”

“Yes?”

“And basilisks are able to walk as soon as they’re born. Just look at this one. Meaning that, now that their eggs have hatched, the parents are going to start looking for food to raise their babies. And they’re going to look anywhere they can find easy prey.”

“Truly?” The clerk reflexively looked at Nishka to gauge whether this was true.

She nodded. “Wyverns are super solidly built—the brick shithouse of the dragon kingdom—so it takes a little while before they can fly. But basilisks live on the ground, so they leave their nests right away in order to flee from predators.”

“I...I see.”

I leaned over the counter to look the clerk in the eyes, trying my best to look menacing despite being completely in the buff. The man looked distinctly uncomfortable. “So, buddy,” I said. “I wanna check something with you.”

“Y-yes?”

“Weren’t you saying that this dungeon-hunting quest wouldn’t be complete unless both basilisks were defeated?”

“Th-th-that’s right.” He smiled very, very tightly. “If you weren’t sure to kill both of them, we couldn’t consider the terms of the request f-f-fulfilled!”

“In other words, since we’ve only killed one of the basilisks, we haven’t completed the quest.”

“Correct, yes, true!”

“Well, in that case, I assume the guild won’t mind hiring some other adventurers. But I can promise you they won’t be able to complete the quest, either.”

“What does that mean?” The young clerk’s smile twitched out of existence. He was clearly afraid of what I might say next.

“We made a map in order to attack the dungeon, and we know exactly what it’s like in there. And on our way back, we destroyed the one passage into the dungeon so the basilisks wouldn’t be able to escape.”

“A-aha...”

“We’ll accept your view that we failed in the quest, but we’re taking back the parts of the basilisk we did kill. Paying a fee for breach of contract *and* giving up these parts for you to make a profit off of? We’d be losing too much money.”

“Ah, well, w-we would rather you not do that, if at all possible.”

“No can do, friendo. We brought these parts here. They don’t belong to you, now do they?”

“That’s...that’s specifically true, if you’re general about it, but...”

“I clearly remember hearing you say earlier that the condition for meeting the quest was to kill two basilisks. That’s what he said, right?”

The party members all nodded their heads in unison. Nishka even piped up cheerfully, “I heard it!” and rested a hand on her hip, which set her giant boobs nodding along with us too.

Now that I had him backed into a corner, it was time for him to offer a compromise.

The clerk stared straight at me, looking decidedly more tense now. “Hold on, now! You’re trying to trick me. I’ll have none of it; I’m calling the manager!”

“We’re adults here. I don’t think that’s necessary. We have a proposition for you.”

“Do you? I’m, ah, listening...”

Oh, come on, now. Who was acting like he was being scammed when he was the dweebus who tried to convince us we failed the quest...?! I bit back my irritation.

“What would you say,” I said, “to letting us take on the quest again? Fresh. Naturally, we would have to take these parts back for now, but once we defeat the other basilisk, we would give both sets to you.”

The clerk stared blankly.

I continued: “So how much would a dungeon raid that includes killing two basilisks cost? The reward for the original quest was...what was it again?”

“It was thirty gold pieces, Shooter.”

“Thanks, Mari. That’s right,” I said, leaning my face closer to the clerk’s. “Thirty. Gold. Pieces. So with two basilisks, we would have to double the amount, wouldn’t we? I don’t suppose the guild has any problem with that?”

“Yes, well, that’s quite the call, and I don’t know if I can make it, but it’s very interesting, you know, and quite the offer, ah, proposition, or—I’m going to go confer with my boss, please don’t move, or talk to anyone, or do anything, just—just wait, now, thanks, goodbye!”

In the end, the guild decided they would pay us the reward for the first basilisk, then pay out again for the follow-up hunt. As for the clerk, I heard he got an earful from management. Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy.

“I want to go to the public baths today!”

It was early morning, and I was admonishing Yoi for wetting the bed again when she suddenly came up with the idea.

Bathing in this world primarily consisted of filling a tub with hot water and climbing in, not that I ever gave those customs much thought—I didn’t have a very typical Japanese outlook on things, and I don’t particularly obsess over soaking in a big bathtub. Here in Bulka, though, they had similar bathing customs as in Japan.

Honestly, even though I didn’t normally give it a second thought, part of me was happy I would be able to climb into some water and just soak.

“Isn’t that expensive, miss?” I asked, wiping the baby basilisk clean.

“Kwee?”

Yoi smiled, her little white teeth peeking out between her lips. Apparently, Yoi loved baths. She leapt out of her easy chair in the study and threw her arms up in the air, cheering. “If you have an adventurer tag, you get the adventurer discount! They deduct taxes from the quest rewards, so in return they give us special privileges!”

Nishka beamed. “Ohhh, I’ve heard about the baths here. I’m definitely comin’

along.”

“I couldn’t call myself Japanese if I didn’t enjoy a good long bath,” Mari added.

“Kwee, kwee-kwee-kweeee!”

Nishka and Mari were both caught up in Yoi’s infectious excitement.

As for our baby boy, he had to be good and stay home. If the bath staff found a frilled lizard floating around in the tub, they would probably get upset about hygiene issues. I moved to put him into the cage where he slept, but before I could close the lid, the little bastard snapped his beak on my fingers. Heh, nice try, but the little guy was all gum still. The big, bad bite only tickled!

“You stay here and be good, little guy. Time for Uncle Shuta to soak in some gorgeous scenery.”

This was all the day after we got back from our follow-up basilisk quest. (I’ll get to that, promise!) It was taking some time to process the payment for the basilisk hunt, so we were just loafing around Yoi’s mansion and generally smelling awful together. Back in the village, even I had been repulsed by how much I reeked before they allowed me to bathe, but that was nothing compared to the lingering stench of the dungeon.

The really tricky blood spatters sat on me for days, and the smell got to be overwhelming.

After we got back to Yoi’s mansion, we all scrubbed ourselves down fervently, but there was a limit to what we could accomplish with so much dead monster on us. The stench clung to every pore, to the point that it interfered with our sleep.

“This is actually my first time going to a public bath in this world,” I said to Mari on our way there. “They didn’t have one in the village, so I didn’t think this place even had a custom of soaking in hot water.”

“Really?” she replied. “I use the public baths all the time. But their civilization is at a different stage than ours, so I still can’t do it every day.”

Yes! She was still being nice to me. And all we had to do was get back to civilization, where I guess it was harder for her to not think of me as another person. Still, it bothered me that she'd been such a dick in the first place. Was it all because she got treated as a beloved goddess when she arrived, and I didn't?

"But after so long, what Japanese person wouldn't be itching for a long, leisurely soak in some hot water?" Mari mused. Interlocking her fingers behind her head, she gazed up at the sky with such excitement I could swear she was even humming to herself.

With her arms raised, her sleeveless dress revealed her unprotected ribs. Just like with Nishka, Mari wasn't doing any underarm "maintenance," either. I got hung up on it and pondered the sight.

"Hey!" she snapped. "Don't stare at me like that. N-no one expects me to shave in this world, so I don't. Does it really bother you that much? We aren't even *in* our world anymore!"

"Oh, no. Why shouldn't you go natural? I think I even prefer it this way."

Oops. Didn't mean to say that second part out loud.

Though...I remembered feeling a new interest awakening in me when I saw Nishka's purple-hued armpit hair—when had that been? On the road into Bulka? Or maybe when we were in the inn? I started coughing loudly.

"I see. N-natural..."

"Yeah! Having hair rules. My dad's hair is getting thin and I feel so bad for him. The hairier, the, uh! The merrier?"

"O-oh yeah?"

I dodged the topic as best I could and walked a tiny bit faster toward the public baths.

"Ey bozos, what're we talkin' about over here?"

"Ack! Please don't scare me like that, Nishka!"

"D-don't ask!"

Somehow, Nishka had come up behind us without a sound and thrown her

arms around our shoulders.

Nishka was just slightly shorter than me, so she managed to get her arm around me easily. But the timing and force in Nishka's arms yanked me and Mari down to the point our faces were almost buried in her swinging breasts.

Great! And terrifying, because I couldn't let her know how unbothered by that I was.

"We were just talking about hair. About how important hair is."

"What hair?"

"We were talking about your frizzy hair, Nishka."

"Jerk! My hair is stylish!" Nishka patted her hair, which was still mussed and flat in places from sleep; every time she tried to smooth it, her frizz popped back up.

As expected, the public baths were the kind where people rented their own individual room. Picture karaoke booths: you reserve your bath at the front desk and then they assign you a room big enough for your group. Our room was probably about the same size as the bathing area in a small traditional inn, and it featured a bathtub that was a full hundred square feet with some kind of shelf that a person could lie down on—no idea what that last one was for.

But there was one major problem. See, your traditional inn's gonna have baths for families or couples. No big deal, right? That's just families, couples, all that good stuff. In this case, however...

"Hey, Mari."

"What do you want?"

"Is this gonna be okay?"

"It's the way they do things here. No one cares. This world isn't a kind one..."

It was one thing to see Nishka casually start taking her clothes off in the dressing area and set them to one side, but Mari didn't seem to be too worried about it, either. Even my young mistress shouted, "Yippee!" and, just like she did at home, insisted that I take her frilly dress off for her.

I was still concerned for Mari's feelings. "Are you sure this isn't unpleasant for you?"

"As long as you don't stare at me like a douche, no. Slaves are less than human, *Shuta*. Having a slave see you is no different than being looked at by a dog."

With that, Mari turned her back, set down her sword, removed her belt, and started to take off her sleeveless dress.

She talked big, but I could tell she was pretty embarrassed. Numerous tiny scars covered the pale skin of her back. Were they the marks of her intensive sword training in this world? There were plenty of blotches on her back, too—maybe bruises?

If I looked for too long, I knew it would confuse Shuta Jr., so I tore my eyes away and pulled my own pants off. (I know, right? Pants! We'll get there.)

Holding a small towel over the front of her body, Mari turned back around to face us. When she saw my naked body, she was merciless. "Ugh, what is *up* with that weird dong? It looks like a bird flattened against a semi tru—"

"Sh-shut up!"

Then something even more unexpected happened: some burly goblins appeared in the bathing area and helped to scrub us down.

There was no clear separation between the bath and the sauna, but we were supposed to lie down on the bench and let the steam hanging over the bath roll over us. The goblins draped a warm cloth soaked in citrus-scented water over my body. They let us rest like that for a little while, then sprinkled some oil on us and gave us massages.

"That tickles! Right, Mr. Slave?"

"You're right, it does. My body is sending me all these little warning signals."

If these goblins weren't so old, it might have put me in a precarious situation. Even so, I wasn't completely comfortable with the goblin who was washing my young mistress so intently, especially not after that gatekeeper Nishka had to deal with. Yoi was also a goblin, I guess, but if any guy started creeping on my

little goblin girl, we were going to have mondo problems. But apparently the swole goblin was just a professional, which meant he got to keep his kneecaps.

“I see you’ve built up a fair amount of grime, sir,” a goblin noted. “If you don’t come to the baths every so often, your good looks won’t count for much!”

“It’s been a long time since I came to a bath house. Look at my belly button. I’m just a slave.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you were a slave. In that case, you need to get your master to bring you along to the baths more often!”

Yoi had been listening to our conversation and she raised her head up to object. “I-I just bought Mr. Slave a few days ago. I haven’t had a chance! If there’s something wrong with him, you should tell the slave trader!”

“Don’t fret, little mistress. Stay still so I can scrub you.”

Nishka must’ve really enjoyed the experience, because she dozed off and started snoring. The top half of her towel was like snow on the peak of a Himalayan mountain. It seemed to be making her massage difficult for her goblin. Even her mouth was hanging open. What a mess.

And then there was Mari.

“I don’t want your hands wandering anywhere they shouldn’t, got it? That’s—eep! Not there! Or, well...maybe you *should* massage them. Just to make them bigger. That’s true, isn’t it? Could y—”

The goblin cleared his throat loudly. “I’m sorry, miss, but we aren’t *that* sort of business. We’re here to clean, not to, ah, *rub*.”

Once the rubdown was complete and our bodies were clean, we could soak in the bath at last.

According to some book I read, submerging yourself in hot water up to the level of your heart is supposed to be bad for you, but it had been so long since I’d been in warm water, I couldn’t have cared less about such nitpicky warnings. I sunk down all the way to my shoulders with a loud splash, oblivious to how the water spilled over the lip of the tub.

“This feels great! Doesn’t it, Mr. Slave?”

“It certainly does, Miss Yoi. Do you need help getting in?”

“I got it! Let me sit on your lap.”

“Uh, um, I’m still a little sore, so, maybe not today.”

Yoi pouted, but she stayed on her side of the tub. And me? I made sure to keep as much of the hundred square feet of bath as I could between us. Whatever the bathing standards were in this world, I was a little too not-actually-related-to-her and way too inappropriately gendered to entertain that kind of request.

Still, it made me think. Back on Earth, I’d been single. But if I had a kid, I imagine I would have done stuff like this back in Japan, lap and all—admittedly, per onsen rules, with a son. I was thirty-two years old, so it wouldn’t have been unrealistic for me to have a child around the same age as Yoi. Maybe I would have been a good dad, or maybe it wouldn’t have been up my alley. Heck, maybe it was something to start thinking about. Cassandra was waiting for me to come back to the village, after all...

I was musing over these thoughts when Mari and Nishka came up and started lowering themselves into the tub one leg at a time.

Man, Nishka really had...assets. Just. A hell of a portfolio. Massive, bouncing... stocks.

Paradise.

Hey, fun fact: boobs actually float in the bath. Can you believe it?

After I’d gotten my fill of gazing at Nishka’s enormous breasts, I carefully examined Mari’s more modest chest as well. Stealth mode... If I looked for too long, Mari was going to make a face at me, so I had to be subtler about it. But my little buddy protested. *Look longer*, he whispered. *See more. Moooooooooore.*

“Um, Mr. Slave? It looks like there’s something wriggling under the water near your...”

Oh shit. “Uh—what?”

My little guy was at full attention.

“What the hell?!” Mari snarled.

“I-I keep telling you, it’s not my fault! See, I was looking at your boobs and then I got hard—that goes for both of you, by the way, so with your combined power of course I was gonna pop a b—*gluggh!*”

“You are in *sight* of a *child*.”

More fun facts: a wet cloth can be used as a weapon.

Mari’s face turned scarlet. She swung her sopping wet towel over her head and whipped it into my face at full force. It knocked me out right on the spot.

Okay, with *that* vital information out of the way, back to the basilisk. We accepted the do-over quest to hunt the thing, and we were getting our supplies in order before heading out to attack the dungeon.

After analyzing our shortcomings from the last venture, we concluded more effective equipment would be a huge help. My trusty mace had held up against kobolds and spotted pike, and done by me well in the fight against the ogres on our way back to town, but it just wasn’t a suitable defense against a giant basilisk. I wound up switching to a spear. More reach would be a lot more useful against an opponent with a longer attack range.

Nishka recommended one without a spike on the other end. “A spike’s all right if you can kill somethin’ with one strike, but I think it’s better to smack it around with more hits—especially an enemy like this one.”

We brought the baby basilisk with us to the weapon shop, and now Nishka held it up to show me. “The spot below his belly is soft—Isn’t that right, little guy? I’m sure it hardens up as they get older, but it’s like that with wyverns and other dragons, too. Your hits are more likely to get through on the underside of their bodies.”

So that was that. Based on Nishka’s descriptions, we planned to split the party during our attack; she and I would be fighting from below, looking up at the belly of the beast. If we could get that close, it’d be useful to have something to stab up with.

In the end, we bought three spears: one each for Nishka, Mari, and me. The spears were about as wide as my shoulders, which was a good size for a

cramped dungeon. If we ended up just as drained as we had last time, the spears could double as walking staffs.

“And Ganjamary,” said Nishka, “you should really send your weapons out to get sharpened. When you slash against the scales on these guys—wyverns and basilisks and the like—it busts up the edge on your sword something nasty. You might even chip your blade.”

“All right, I’ll do that.” Mari accepted Nishka’s advice, then pulled her longsword out and asked me, “Actually, do you think I can keep using this sword, Shooter?”

I wasn’t exactly a warrior of old, I just did warrior stuff part-time back on Earth. Still, I wasn’t about to complain about her reaching out to me, so I did my best to answer. “Let me see. Hmm. I’m pretty sure you could. They sure do make their swords sturdy in this world, huh?”

“Yeah. I’ve been using this sword for about two years, and it hasn’t given me any problems with slicing people up or taking down monsters.”

“That’s because the longswords of this world have such thick, broad blades. Even when sharpening the blade makes it thinner, there’s a lot of sword left. That’s one of the great things about the way they make ’em; you can get a whole lotta slicing outta these babies. Oh, but look at this part. It’s cracked wide open. You must have hit a bone.”

“Hm. Let me see that.”

Nishka and I pressed our bodies together to check out the sword...uh, *real* close. Not only were her breasts right up on me, I could feel her breath running hot over my entire, naked body.

My little buddy downstairs was getting restless and starting to stir, so I quickly changed the subject. “M-maybe we should ask the shopkeeper! I’m sure you can keep using it, but we might as well get an expert’s opinion. Oh, I think he’s, uh, over there!”

“You’re right. Thanks.”

Yoi was also buying new equipment. I didn’t know what that meant in her case. I thought maybe they would make her a new grimoire, but I guess not. It

was actually a bookmark, which apparently they sold in weapon shops in this world. Neat? “What do you think of this bookmark, Mr. Slave?”

“It sure has a cute picture on it. I think it’s perfect for you.”

“He he he. This glyph means ‘slip through shadows’!”

“Slip through shadows...?”

I’d thought it was just a picture, but it was actually a glyph. But still...‘slip through shadows’? Made me a little worried about this little girl’s future. It would be trouble if she turned into an overgrown edgelord teen like Nishka.

“Of course, Mr. Slave! We’re going to be fighting in a dungeon. The best protection is for me to sneak around and attack a monster from behind.”

Nishka, Yoi’s fellow moody adolescent, nodded vigorously. “That’s right, baby girl! I’m impressed!”

“I’d prefer you not call me ‘baby girl,’ Boobsy!”

“Excuse me? My boobs aren’t even that big!”

Now, what about me? Considering my experience on the last run, I was mulling whether to shore up my armor with something more heavy duty. So far, my basic strategy in any battle had been to focus on evasion, so even though I knew others relied on chainmail—like the band who came to our village and some other folks in the adventurer’s guild—I wanted to avoid using it if at all possible. On the other hand, iron-reinforced leather armor was clearly the sort of premium option out of reach to anyone without the deep pockets of a Templar like Gangi Mari. In the end, I asked my young mistress if she could buy me the most low-end shield available.

“I saw you looking at the shields for a long time, Mr. Slave. Do you want one?”

“I do, yes. I think I’m more about dodging, so I do best with light armor. I’d be very happy if I could have one of these, though.”

“Okay. Can you take this up to the counter, Ganjamary?”

“Oh, thank you so much! Thank you so, so much.”

“Sure. Also, Shooter...” Mari took the disk-shaped shield, then looked me over

from head to toe. “Isn’t it about time you bought some clothes? You’re being a bad influence on Yoi. And, well...it’s just unpleasant having to look at your freaky penis. It looks like a gargoyle wrestling a deer...”

“I thought slaves weren’t allowed to wear clothes. May I?”

“As long as you keep your belly-button piercing visible, yeah, sure. Right, Yoi?”

“Yup! We’ll go buy you some clothes after this, Mr. Slave!”

Later, at long last, I received what I had yearned for all this time—pants!

Decked out in our new equipment, we launched take two of our attack on the basilisk’s dungeon, this time, with dragon-specialist Nishka the Scalesplitter herself delving with us.

“I dunno why, but just having you in the party makes me feel like we can beat this thing, Nishka.”

“What’re you talkin’ about? We’re gonna beat it because we worked out a strategy and prepped all our equipment. You sure you guys got everything?”

“We’ll be fine. And I can’t believe how good it feels to have pants on.”

Ah, the joy of pants—pants and *more*.

Under my brand-new poncho, I wore a fur vest that once belonged to my father-in-law, the g-string my beloved wife knitted for me, and...*pants*! I cannot say that enough. Pants. Pants...!

It was my job to carry everyone’s things, so I also had a wooden rack backpack. My mace, which I was using as a spare weapon, hung from the frame. My shortsword was slung at my hip, as well as a round shield and a spear that was already serving me well as a walking stick.

Everyone except Yoi was equipped with a spear, so you could say we had a full complement of spare weapons. In addition to the machete she had brought with her from our settlement, Nishka carried a high draw-weight longbow picked out from the weapon shop in town. Nishka seemed head-over-heels in love with that new bow. It was going to be essential in the coming fight, so

buying it had been absolutely necessary.

“Just check out the flexibility on this baby. My homemade one isn’t terrible, but you can feel the price in the drawstring alone. Even the texture!”

“I think the materials in the spears are better than the ones they gave us in the village, too, no?” I said. “They’re so light.”

“Kwee! Kwee!” the baby piped up in the middle of our conversation.

“What’s wrong? Can you tell we’re back where you were born? Nishka, do you know if animals in the dragon family have a homing instinct?”

“Umm, I’m not very familiar with basilisks. As far as wyverns go, they have a habit of building their nests near where they were born, so I guess it could be somethin’ like that.”

“Interesting.” I could get on board with that. Still, it was strange that the baby was making such a fuss.

At that point, we were moving through the middle level of the dungeon. We broke through the passageway we had collapsed as we fled and, keeping a backward glance on the remains of the fallen basilisk, headed for the domed room with the underground lake.

The basilisk carcass was already starting to decay, and it looked like some sort of animal was in a days-long process of pulling the body apart. There were no kobolds in evidence, so it was likely the work of some other monster.

In any case, the baby was throwing a fit. I was starting to become convinced returning to his place of birth was the cause for his behavior when suddenly—

“Kweeeeeeeeee!” His tiny maw let loose an earsplitting howl.

None of us could withstand the screech, and we curled over and covered our ears against it. He was just a baby, but that cry sounded exactly like a miniature version of the roar basilisks used to stun their enemies.

“Wh-what’s wrong? Calm down, little guy!”

I was starting to panic when Mari suddenly called out to me, “Do something, Shooter! He’s going to tip off the adult that we’re sneaking in!”

She was absolutely right. There was still an adult basilisk and its babies lurking deeper in.

Maybe he's calling for his parent to rescue him? The thought darted through the back of my mind but quickly dissipated. I was holding the baby basilisk tight in my arms, and he was trembling. He was scared, and he clung to me as if begging me to rescue him.

"I guess we shouldn't have brought the baby with us, huh, Mr. Slave?" Yoi was holding tight to the fabric of my pants. She looked pretty worried.

"Ergh. It wouldn't have been safe to leave him at the guild, either. And we need him as bait for Nishka's strategy to work."

Nishka's plan involved one of us acting as a decoy. We'd move upwind with the baby while Nishka stayed downwind, from where she could launch an attack on the basilisk's weak point with her longbow. The basilisk would be desperate to get its baby back, and we would take advantage of its desperation. Using this innocent babe as bait was unorthodox, but killing a basilisk was no easy task unless you used your brain.

If our baby basilisk wound up revenge-killing us one day, I don't think I could blame the little guy.

The plan also involved using the bow the same way Nishka and I had to take down the wyvern in Apegut Forest—except this time we had a spellcasting specialist with us, and she could take the beast down with a lightning attack.

Let me explain that a little more clearly. We were going to shoot an arrow made of steel into the basilisk, then hit the arrow with lightning magic and fry us some lizard.

The whole thing was Nishka's idea. She also suggested that once we hit the basilisk's weak spot, if we kept hitting it with a string of magic attacks, each hit would be even more effective.

"If it's extra huge, it's gonna be hard to get poison through its whole body. But magic would affect it pretty much instantly, right?"

At the time, we all thought her idea was perfect, but now we were faced with the possibility of having to fire the leading arrow without the advantage of a

surprise attack.

As we cautiously moved deeper into the dungeon, a ferocious roar rang through the passage from further in. There was no mistaking it. That was the roar of an adult basilisk.

“This is bad. I think it heard exactly where we are,” said Mari.

She and Yoi nodded to each other and Yoi gave me my orders. “Hurry up, everybody. Leave our bags here, Mr. Slave. We have to focus on just getting into the dome!”

“Yes, Miss Yoi.”

Nishka, however, was pulling a steel arrow from her quiver with an icy calm. “Relax. We’ve got a spellcaster with us. No need to panic. It doesn’t matter where I shoot from—as long as I can get the arrow to punch through its scale armor, it’ll be easy to hit it with your attack. You got your magic ready to shoot off as soon as I hit it, baby girl?”

“I’ll take care of it, Nishka!”

Since her armor was so light and easy to move in, Nishka threw her arms around Yoi in an embrace, then ran off down the passage.

The three of us continued forward.

I took Nishka’s spear as another spare; Mari and I were to attack with the spears in case the magic attack didn’t finish off the basilisk and we were faced with an extended battle.

But that was the backup plan. Today, Nishka the Scalesplitter was the star of the show.

Once we reached the dome over the underground lake, we started searching for the adult basilisk, Nishka in the lead.

It looked like the basilisk hadn’t loosed its roar by the underground lake. It must’ve been moving through a different passage, one that connected to the dome. Judging by the sound of its footsteps, that passage was wider than the one we were coming through. Maybe it was another route to the surface.

A heavy scraping rumbled through the rock, getting closer and closer to the underground lake.

“I see another tunnel over there! Are you ready, Nishka?” Yoi called out.

“You bet I am. I’ll hit it with two quick shots. Will that buy you enough time?”

“Yes, it will!”

“I bet these things gotta stand up on their back legs sometimes to watch their babies. I’ll shoot it in the lung when it does that—and I’ll get it on the first try! Not even gonna shut my eyes.”

Licking her lips, Nishka yelled back and forth with Yoi. Apparently, when she was having a serious discussion, Yoi didn’t feel the need to call Nishka “Boobsy.”

“No offense to you adventurers, but when you’re a hunter, you’ve gotta match wits with your prey. Nothin’ against that beat-shit-to-a-pulp adventurer style, but today we’re gonna do things my way. Watch this...”

Still wary of the approaching rumble in the ground, we kept our eyes on the entrance to the other passage. The baby couldn’t stop trembling. His own parent was about to appear, but at this point, I doubt he recognized this creature as a protector. He buried his face against my chest, every now and then stealing a glance up at me. The baby was clearly pleading with me to save him.

I gave the little guy one last squeeze. My other hand squeezed the shaft of my spear.

“There, there. There’s a good boy. You stay put right here, okay? Uncle Shuta’s gonna go fight your daddy, but I hope you’ll forgive me. And if you resent me, please just wait ’til you’re older to yell at me. When that time comes, we can fight.”

“Kweee!”

Despite our baby-decoy plan, Mari scolded me when I set him down on the ground. “What are you doing? The thing’s almost here!”

I adjusted my grip on the spear, then she and I ran apart, clearing some distance between each other. If we were too close together and the basilisk got

us both with one hit, we'd be down two fighters at once.

We also agreed that Nishka and Yoi weren't allowed to take any potions. Everyone else—meaning me and Mari—downed a couple to increase our physical strength and boost our energy. Maybe it was the potions' fault that I got all weird on the baby like that.

I looked back over at the entrance to the other passage. At that precise moment, the cruel face of the basilisk emerged from the tunnel. The battle was about to begin. All our preparations were complete. This time, we were going to win. I was sure of it.

"Here we go! Get in there and taunt the thing!"

At Nishka's signal, a fireball appeared in Gangi Mari's hands and she launched it into the air. Unlike last time, she only put enough power into the fireball to tickle the basilisk's nose. She could've packed more power, but the important thing was to draw the basilisk's attention.

The basilisk snorted the fireball up its snout. The spell dissipated.

We were standing right in front of it, so the basilisk had no trouble seeing exactly who was fool enough to mess with it. It growled, long and low, and reared up tall in the spacious underground hall.

"Stupid animal..." Nishka muttered, almost too low to hear. "That's exactly what we wanted."

Fitting a readied arrow to the bow she held in her left hand, she pulled back the bowstring and let it fly. I heard the arrow shrieking through the air overhead, then watched it sink into the basilisk's chest. Perfect!

The basilisk wailed and brought its front legs back to the ground, but Nishka had already fitted the next arrow to her bow and fired at the basilisk's back left leg, targeting its knee. A hit. Overwhelmed, the beast touched one of its front legs to the wound.

"When the target's this huge, ya don't even need magic to guide the arrows!" Nishka shouted, nocking another arrow to continue her rapid attack. "I'm firin' another one!"

This time, her arrow struck the top of the basilisk's skull. The basilisk screamed as the arrows pelted it, but such attacks were nowhere near enough to wear it down. Obviously, since it was so huge, its defensive capabilities were staggering.

Nishka calmly drew a fourth arrow from her quiver. She could stay calm with a target so huge and far away, but that didn't mean she was going to slow down. She was like a runaway train.

She let fly the fourth arrow and it struck the top of the basilisk's skull again. The strike made the basilisk growl low in annoyance and swipe at its forehead with its front legs. Just then—

“In the words of the ancient spellcasters: Physical, magical, thunderbolt!”

Yoi recited the spell, her voice echoing with a jarring rhythm, and the grimoire in her hand began to glow, evidence of a successful casting.



The fireball spell appeared in a caster's hands, but this thunderbolt struck from the ceiling with a loud *crack* and a flash of light.

A massive boom echoed through the domed room.

Smoke rose from the basilisk and it groaned. We had expected the thunderbolt to strike the basilisk's chest, but apparently it was attracted to the arrows in the creature's skull instead. Unfortunately, the basilisk was still on its feet, howling.

"It's still alive. Change of plans!" Mari called.

Well, shit. Yoi would need time to launch her next attack. The basilisk was surely weakened, but I didn't see it twitching at all. It still looked fully intent on continuing the fight. Mari dove into its range, ready to take it on hand-to-hand.

"Stop! Don't move!" Nishka barked, cutting her off.

The basilisk shuffled toward us, dragging each foot heavily forward. But after a few steps, it came to a halt, dropped to its stomach, and stopped.

"See? It's been paralyzed. It's alive, but it's in no shape to move."

"I-I see."

"And see? I didn't shoot it with any more arrows than I needed to. True pro stuff. Every one of 'em landed a critical hit. Sure, the thing's still kickin', but you can just finish it off. Go ahead an' take yer time, baby girl. Think you can get another thunder spell off?"

"Y-yes, Nishka, I can," Yoi hurried to answer, then focused on the spell recitation so she could drop the finishing lightning strike on the basilisk.

Our prey had lost the ability to fight back, so blasting it with a powerful spell didn't seem right, somehow. I felt like we were torturing it, in a way. But then, how else were we going to take down such a huge basilisk?

Nishka continued casually firing a litany of instructions at Yoi and instructing us to draw back. I scooped the baby back up, figuring he wouldn't want to watch as his parent was murdered right in front of him. Nobody would want that. Anyone who went through something so horrible would absolutely grow up to resent the villains responsible.

And yeah, I know that was a human-centric way of thinking about the situation, and there was no way of knowing whether the baby would even understand enough of what was going on to hate me when he grew up, but *man* this bit felt a little messed up.

“All right, here goes. In the words of the ancient spellcasters: O magic that abides in my spirit, now I bid you break free. Become my avenging hammer and strike my enemy from this world. Physical, magical, thunderbolt!”

This incantation was longer than usual, loading the spell with that much more power. The lightning bolt blasted the immobilized basilisk, who’d been drawing only shallow breaths. There was a deafening thunderclap.

But it still wasn’t over. When we drew closer to the basilisk, the stench of half-roasted meat wafted from its body. Nishka yanked a fang from its mouth, once again living up to her second name of “Scalesplitter.”

The rest of us left that gruesome work to Nishka and busied ourselves with another task. There were still a couple young basilisks in need of elimination. If we left them alive, there was no question they would become the masters of this dungeon. So even though it meant exterminating little kids who weren’t hurting anybody, it had to be done.

“Mr. Slave? We really do have to kill this baby’s siblings, don’t we?”

“Yes, we do. They’re not tame, like our guy. He’s practically domesticated.”

“I suppose that’s true. But they’re still babies. I feel bad for them.”

“I do, too. But nature can be cruel at times.”

It felt like a nasty lesson to be teaching such a young kid, though.

“Sometimes adventurers have to do stuff like this,” Mari declared, ice in her voice. “You have to pick a side.”

Mari stood before the baby’s siblings, who were cowering in the shadows at the edge of the domed room. She drew her broad-bladed longsword from where it hung at her hip and weighed it in her hands, looking it over to make sure it was still in good shape as she approached the two little basilisks.

I only caught a glimpse of her face, but for all of her hard words, Mari didn’t

look happy about it, either. So I called out to her to stop. “Mari, let me do it.”

“What? But Shooter...”

Mari took up her fighting stance, but I wrapped my hands around hers as they gripped the hilt. Maybe this world wasn’t a kind one; I remembered Mari telling me something similar. But that was no reason to deliberately seek the cruelest path. If I could take some of the burden from Mari’s shoulders, maybe her opinion of the world would soften.

Or maybe it was some kind of off-kilter feminism, or maybe I just couldn’t stand to see a girl endure more anguish.

Look, I don’t know, okay? I just felt like I had to do this.

“I have a little experience using a sword,” I said. “So maybe I’ll be better at killing these two without letting them suffer.”

“A-all right.”

I don’t know if she understood where I was coming from, but an inscrutable look came over Mari’s face and she handed her sword to me.

Standing over the trembling basilisk children, I lifted the longsword over my head.

One sweeping cut. A downward slice, then. Right through the top of their heads. I wish it went as clean as I made it sound. Would’ve put a quick end to my depressing little inner monologue. I don’t think my technique was very good, though.

Still had to be better than making a girl who’d already suffered so much do this.

Yoi’s eyes welled with tears, and it seemed like she was going to sob. Mari watched me with a miserable, desert-dry exhaustion.

I flicked the blood off the sword and handed it back to Gangi Mari. “What should we do with the baby?”

“You’re not going to kill him?” she whispered to me.

“How could I? Look at Miss Yoi.”

“You’re right. She looks like she’s about to start crying. Or, I guess she already *is* crying.”

Glancing back, I saw my little mistress clutching our baby basilisk in her arms, fat tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Hey, didn’t you ever see stories on the news about old guys who would find and raise bear cubs or whatever?”

“Like in Russia or Hokkaido? I guess, yeah.”

“Well, a basilisk is like the bear of lizards. How about if I take him in and try to raise him?”

Mari sighed. “C’mon, you can’t be serious. The food alone would cost more than you can imagine. This isn’t like adopting a dog or a cat. You get that, right?”

“I know! But it would kind of be a way to make up for my crimes, y’know? Or maybe that’s just my human egotism talking.”

As we debated in hushed tones, Nishka approached, hefting the inverted scale she had carved out of the carcass in one hand. “Why not, though? I’ve heard about people in distant lands stealin’ wyvern kids and puttin’ ’em to work. Seems like that means it’s totally possible to raise ’em.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. *But*. If you do keep him, y’know he’s not gonna be a baby forever, right? And you gotta give him a real name,” Nishka said, her face serious, looking around at all of us. “You’re his parent now, Shooter, so you pick one.”

“You’re right. How about Basil? Since he’s a basilisk.”

Mari gave me a weird look. “Like the herb? I guess it’s easy to remember, at least.”

“I like it. That’s a great name!” Nishka declared.

My thoroughly average naming skills elicited a range of opinions.

“Miss Yoi? We’ve thought of a name for the baby. What do you think of ‘Basil’? According to a very old story where I come from, that name means

‘king.’ Isn’t that the perfect name for this scaly little conqueror?”

With that, our dungeon delve at last came to an end.

So hey there, my name is Yoshida Shuta, and I’m thirty-two years old. I’m a slave, and a village hunter who was formerly a part-time warrior. Now I’m also an adventurer working out of the town of Bulka, but I have a wife back in Apegut village. I guess I’ll put down roots in this world and see where life takes me...and I’ll do it all with Basil.

Side Story:

Miss Yoi's Magic Class

“MR. SLAVE! Today I'm gonna be your teacher and we're gonna study magic together! First, I'm gonna tell you about the easiest spells, then we'll try casting some beginner-level ones together!”

Hey folks, the name's Yoshida Shuta, I'm thirty-two years old, and I must be dreaming because I'm a lowly slave about to start studying the arcane arts with my kid master.

The day we finished our basilisk quest, we were waiting around for the guild to pay out our reward money. It seemed as good an opportunity as any, so Yoi, good little girl that she was, decided to give me a lecture on what exactly was up with magic in this fantasy world.

“What's goin' on?” Nishka asked.

“Apparently Yoi is going to teach Shooter the basics of magic,” said Mari. “Of course, it'll take him much longer to actually learn how to use it, so I guess she's just giving him Magic 101?”

“Just an introduction, huh? Gotta start small, I guess, seeing as Shooter's such a slow learner. Still...not sure an introduction's gonna let him do anything. Well, whatever. We'll see what happens.” Nishka seemed to find the whole thing hilarious.

Yoi held her lecture in the sitting room of her manor; from one angle, the holy maiden and the steppe barbarian observed a master and her slave engaged in study, but from another, two girls chattered away while other people tried to work.

“Pay attention, Mr. Slave. Students who don't watch their teacher won't learn anything!”

“I-I'm sorry, Miss Yoi. Please go on!”

Gah, what a little cutie-pie, acting like the best little teacher she could be for me!

“Now, firstly, I will explain what magic power is. You need magic power in order to control magic, but everything in the whole wide world has magic power.”

“I see. Everything, huh?”

“Mmhm! For example, I have magic power inside me. I convert that magic power to make magic happen. If you touch me here, on my heart, you can actually feel the magic. Go ahead and try!”

“Huh? You want me to...touch you?” Uh. After the calamity at the public baths, I wasn’t crazy about touching this literal child’s chest, especially with Mari and Nishka over there keeping an eye on us.

“You gotta! Otherwise you won’t understand what magic power actually is, and if you don’t have a feel for it, then you can’t cast spells. You have to touch it. Feel it. Go ahead!”

If this was something I had to do in order to understand what magic and magic power were, I guess it was more like a doctor taking someone’s pulse than anything creepy. That bath incident had really put me on edge.

“Then...I’ll be careful. Please excuse me...whoa!”

“Well, Mr. Slave? Can you feel the warmth? As you become aware of and develop the magic inside you, your body will start to feel all floaty.”

“Huh. Yeah. I can feel it. It’s like warm waves pulsing from your core into your chest... This is magic power?!”

“Yep!”

“Ha! That’s amazing, Miss Yoi! I had no idea magic power had a temperature!”

“Now I’m going to cast a spell for you, so watch what happens to the flow of my magic power.”

“A-all right. I’m watching, miss.”

“Focus on that potted plant over there, Mr. Slave.”

I turned my eyes to the potted plant, as my teacher instructed.

“Physical, magical, thump!”

And do you know what happened then? The heavy fruit on the tree (I have no idea what it’s called) growing in the pot started to sway in the still air. The ripened fruit rustled in the leaves of the tree and plopped to the ground.

“Whoa, so that’s magic! And I could feel you cool down the instant you cast the spell. Did you expend your energy or something?!”

“Mmhm! When you cast a spell, the magic power you’ve worked up inside your body gets consumed instantly!”

Made sense, I guess.

“That was wind magic. The most basic of basic spells.”

Nishka chimed in: “A spell like that’s a snap for me, y’know!”

“Of course it is,” Mari replied. “You can cast more powerful wind spells than Yoi can.”

“That’s right I can. But isn’t that gonna be way too hard for Shooter?”

“I suppose we’ll see.”

Listening to my companions tease me from the couch while I learned wasn’t exactly helping my confidence. Come on, why would anyone expect a beginner to be able to cast spells right away?

“Don’t worry, Mr. Slave! I’ll summon up some more magic power, and you can use that to try casting the same spell!”

“What? You want me to try already?”

“Yeah! We’ll hold hands and my magic power will flow into you. You just gotta picture the wind magic and recite the spell. Try it, Mr. Slave. Here, this grimoire is a trigger for spells!”

“Wow, it’s so heavy. I had no idea spell books weighed this much. What should I say for my spell, Miss Yoi?”

“Try saying it along with me. Here we go—”

“Physical, magical, jiggly wiggly poo!”

“Ph-physical, magical, jiggly...jiggly? No, that’s not it...”

The fruit didn’t sway, but something else sure started to.

As she lounged at the back of the room acting all superior, Nishka’s heavy breasts started wafting, even though there was no wind. Her bulging bazongas bounced up and down, on one bounce leaping with almost enough force that they could have popped the buttons on her blouse—and, on the next bounce, *actually* popping a button off. Her mammoth mammaries burst from the confines of her clothing, triumphant and free!

“Well done!”

“That was *not* well done, you little twit! He obviously did that on purpose!”

“I swear I didn’t, it’s just a misunderstanding, I couldn’t control the power! It was an accident...” I nodded at Nishka’s assets like the three of us were keeping a secret. “What a tragedy.”

“You’re over here claimin’ you can’t do magic, and then somehow you just so happen to target your spell right at my chest? Yeah, sure!”

“Augh! That hurts! I mean, look, it’s not like I coulda hit Mari’s chest with a spell like that! She’s flatter than a slab of marble. Marble doesn’t jiggle either, so—”

“Excuse the hell out of me, what was that?” Mari asked, ice cold.

“What was what?”

“What was—say ‘what’ again, you little scumbag!” she snarled. “You did do it on purpose, didn’t you? I’ll send you buck-ass naked to *hell* if you ever talk to me that way again!”

With Yoi’s help, my first attempt at summoning magic was a huge success. The result, on the other hand, was...dire.

“So that was magic, Mr. Slave. You should keep practicing. Understand?”

“Yes, miss... But they’re shouting for vengeance, Miss Yoi. Could you, uh. Stop...them?”

Yoi giggled cheerfully. I was to reap the fields I had sown alone.

Remember, kids: follow the recommended dosage and use magic responsibly!

Chapter 2:

The Deadbeat Goes Home

GOOOOOD MORNING, folks, and what a beautiful morning it is! Yoshida Shuta reporting in, age thirty-two, busy at work and enthusiastic about it!

What work? Why, I was cleaning away this big old manor in nothing but my g-string, on account of the whole “I am a slave who belongs to the owner of the house” thing. You know. That super chill sitch.

“Darn it, Basil! Stop playing in the bucket, ya doof!”

“Kyu~!”

But from the moment I started mopping the floor, my baby basilisk Basil was so eager to play that he kept pulling little pranks and it was starting to wear on my nerves.

Yep, he was still around too. I hear that the young of predators learn how to hunt by playing as they grow, but the town of Bulka was surrounded by a city wall. With no adversaries to fight, rapidly growing Basil had nothing to stalk and consequently considered playing to be nothing more than fun and games.

“I said cut it out!”

“Kweekwee kwee!”

Basil never listened to a word I said. I righted the bucket he knocked over and was working up to a severe scolding when he fled, galumphing out of the room like a toddler.

I knew exactly where he was headed. He was taking shelter with the adults who babied him, the ones who would protect him from my wrath, and who spoiled the little monster rotten.

“You get back here!”

“Kwee kwee pthhb!” He turned back to look at me for a second, and it was almost like he stuck his tongue out at me. It was maddening.

For his meal tonight, I decided I would switch from mole-rats to tiny fish from the river. Let him think about what he did while he went hungry!

Letting out an indignant snort, I followed him and sure enough, I found him cradled in the arms of my young mistress, who fancied herself an adult, and who looked supremely ticked.

“Oh! Good morning, Miss Yoi.”

“Mr. Slave, you can’t yell at the baby like that! Don’t be so mean to him. Look how scared he is.”

I didn’t think Basil looked all that scared, considering he was scratching behind his neck frill with his hind leg like a self-satisfied cat. But still, when my master gave me a command, I bowed my head respectfully. “I apologize, Miss Yoi. I will do as you bid.”

“A-and, Mr. Slave? Wh-when I woke up this morning, my sheets were all wet...”

“Well, that won’t do, Miss Yoi. Perhaps you drank too much wine after dinner last night?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Slave!”

“Moderation is an important skill for all grown adults, Miss Yoi. Let’s go change your clothes.”

“Okay.”

The little grown-up wetted the bed again this morning. She always did fine in the middle of stressful adventures, but when we returned home, her bladder relaxed right along with the pressure.

I stroked her hair affectionately. “Can you please bring me your wet sheets? I’ll ready the tub and get everything cleaned right up.”

“Okay, Mr. Slave!” she replied and bounded to her bedroom.

Everything was at peace in the world. As much as it could be.

Back when I was growing up, two girls lived on either side of my house. I don’t remember clearly, but I’m pretty sure this happened when I was about three or

so. The three of us would always go to kindergarten together, I think, and go over to each other's houses to play. This was before my little sisters were born, so I was one of the first kids in the neighborhood. And I remember peeing my pants at my friend's house.

I had drunk too much juice. My parents didn't think kids should have super sweetened or carbonated drinks until they were older, so I would sneak tastes at my friends' houses. And while I was taking a nap at my friend Kanae's, I peed my pants. She was so surprised that she called her mom in to take care of the situation right quick. She was pretty considerate, was that Kanae.

But that might as well be ancient history for me now.

"Hey! Shooter! I think your wife would be pretty upset if she saw that smirk on your face while you were holdin' that little girl's underwear."

At the sound of the voice behind me, I snapped back to reality. The voice's origin was a woman with short, purple-highlighted black hair. Sometimes she wore her eyepatch on one eye, and sometimes she wore it on the other. Nishka the Scalesplitter.

"Morning, Nishka. Don't be a shit. I'm just remembering something funny that happened when I was a little boy."

"What, did you wet the bed a lot, too?"

"Just sometimes, heh."

It had been about five days since we wrapped up the basilisk hunt. We went straight to the adventurer's guild to report the quest as done, but they told us they didn't have thirty gold Bulka coins on hand, and could we please come back another time? It was late in the day, and we knew they'd had to put down a ton of money to help outfit the large-scale ogre hunt, so we didn't make a stink.

We were going to go back to the guild today to try again. That was what brought Nishka to Yoi's manor so early in the morning.

"You seem a little too happy being a slave," she said, squinting at me.

"Can we not do this? I didn't exactly choose to become one. I'm just trying to

make the best of a shitty situation.”

“What about the village, and your wife? Once I get my pay, I’m planning to head back.”

“Yeah, I...I don’t know. Gimul asked me to recruit adventurers and find new settlers and hunters. And if I make it back but can’t report any progress other than ‘got enslaved, cleaned a lot,’ that’d be pretty bad.” I let out a long sigh and adjusted the position of my chubby buddy. He’d flopped himself into an uncomfortable spot.

Nishka nodded thoughtfully. “We’re getting paid today, right?”

“Supposedly.”

“How ’bout if I buy you out of slavery with my share?”

“So you’d be my new master? Huh. That’s not a terrible idea. Are you sure you want to spend that much money on me?”

“What do I care? Money’s only good for buyin’ booze. Ain’t no place to spend it back in the village,” Nishka said, rubbing her nose. It was in a rare state of not being red.

Yeah, actually, this was a damn good idea, now that I thought about it! The payday would be enormous. We earned sixty gold by killing those two basilisks. Nishka only joined us for the second trip, but—take away my portion since I was a slave and divide the reward into three—she’d still receive ten gold. That wasn’t as much as Yoi paid to get me from the slave trader, but I remembered Nishka saying she got some money from killing those ogres, too, so all together I thought it might be just enough to buy my freedom.

I had bothered Mari about this earlier, and according to her, one of the gold Bulka coins used as currency in town had the buying power of about two million yen. So after splitting it three ways (again, none for me), Nishka stood to make twenty million off this job.

That was a flabbergasting amount of money to someone like me. It was more than I could have made in six months working odd jobs. Which...was why I was so hesitant to accept her offer.

“Though, c’mon, Nishka, that’s a lot of cash. I always try to avoid being in someone’s debt, too...”

“Are you kiddin’ me? You’re a literal, actual slave right now and you’re hung up on that? Don’t you wanna go back to the village?”

“Of course I do! I just got married. I think about Cassandra every day.”

“Right. So let me handle it. Or are you worried about your baby girl?”

“I mean, I guess getting bought by her made my situation a lot better. And I *am* fond of her.”

“All right, but check this: How ’bout you bring the little girl and Gangi Mari back to the village? They wanted adventurers? You got ’em. That takes care of everything, right?”

Nishka’s suggestion was pretty sensible, presuming I could convince them to go for it. “Huh. I guess that’s true. Let me think about it, just give me a sec.”

“No problem. But don’t hold back on my account.” Nishka rested a hand on her hip and flashed me a smile.

Pretty face, amazing rack, and a sweetheart to boot. She really was the whole package. Yup, that settled it. I couldn’t not give it a shot. I bent over in a deep bow.

“Thank you so much. So, so much.”

“You can thank me after it all works out,” said Nishka’s brea—I mean, uh, Nishka, my very cool friend. Girl power. Yes.

“Here’s to the basilisk hunt! Cheers!” Clink!

“Bottoms up! This beer is delicious.” Slurp!

“We appreciate your help.” Hell yeah!

“Congratulations, everyone. Well done.” No kidding!

“Kwee!” Lizard!

We successfully picked up our dough from the adventurer’s guild and were

now celebrating with a drink at the inn next door. Our tankards were filled with just the sloppiest, nastiest kinda beer. As usual in this world, it was too warm and full of impurities. Just awful. I took one swig and slammed my tankard back on the table.

The beer wasn't the only thing I still wasn't used to. In this fantasy world, anyone could drink beer or wine or whatever, and no one seemed to care how old they were.

Yoi was gulping beer from her tankard in delight, foam building up around her mouth. She let out a satisfied, "Ahhh!" and seemed to be having a good time, but I couldn't help worrying about how all this booze would affect her growth.

Sitting beside Yoi, Mari merely sipped her beer. She was probably pretty much done growing, but she took her drinking slow. "You don't look too happy," she said.

"Ah, you know. I don't really like the beer."

"You really can't drink it unless it's cold? You're utterly spoiled."

"I suppose you're right."

At some point while Mari and I talked, my gaze drifted down toward her chest. When my eyes tried to climb back up I first noticed her cheeks, which were already pink from the alcohol, and then her eyes—erk. She was glaring daggers into me.

"Would you please not ogle me like that? I know I don't have armor on today, but that's no excuse to leer like a sleazebag. It's humiliating! Can you turn it off for a *microsecond*?"

It might not've been the smoothest move, but I couldn't help teasing her. "I'm simply admiring a work of art. What a sublime figure." I pretended to adjust a monocle. "Thank you. Truly, thank you."

Now that she mentioned it, she wasn't wearing her iron-studded leather armor. We weren't on a quest, after all, so it made sense. And, now that I was paying attention, ay caramba—her sleeveless dress actually showed that little swell of her breasts, and the tiny twin peaks! I was going to die. Beautiful. Just beautiful.

On the subject of clothes, it struck me that the people in this world seemed to stick to several sets of the same style. Just how many dresses of the same type did Yoi and Gangi Mari have? And that blouse Nishka always wore, it might as well be her trademark.

Sure, I also wore the same kind of vest day in and day out, but it was a memento of my father-in-law and my only good set of clothes to boot.

Nishka snorted. “All this guy does is check out women’s boobs. He’s constantly starin’ at my chest. You’re such a dirtbag, Shooter.”

Mari gasped. “Wh—is that true, Shooter? All you do? You’re disgusting! How dare you look at us like that! We don’t even have bras on!”

Yoi stirred her drink with her finger. “Mr. Slave is a pervert!” she said in a sing-songy voice.

“No, it isn’t like that. I swear! I was just thinking how people here always wear the same basic outfit, and I just happened to notice that! It’s a, um, worldbuilding thing!”

Nishka was still chuckling, rubbing her reddened nose, and now I was the one stuck frantically justifying myself to the other party members. Aw shit, how was I going to get out of this?

“There’s a simple enough explanation for that. It takes a lot of money to make patterns for clothes. And dyed clothes are incredibly expensive,” Mari explained, her arms crossed tight over her chest.

Yoi imitated her and crossed her arms over her chest, too. “That’s right. I’m growing every single day, so it would be a waste for me to get dyed clothes. See, Mr. Slave?”

“I bought this blouse from a merchant, but I wear it all the time ’cause I’m just poor.”

“Huh. I see. I know some rougher girls out in the sticks wear yellow blouses to school to be rebellious, so I thought maybe that was why you did it.”

“Y’know,” said Nishka, “sometimes I have no idea what you’re talkin’ about.”

“Never mind him. Why don’t we divvy up the reward before the food gets

here?" Mari put an end to the conversation and set the leather pouch stuffed with gold coins on the table.

Yoi and Nishka both pulled out their own leather pouches. They had the sixty gold Bulka coin reward for killing the basilisks, as well as the extra money from the ogre quest. Nishka had already taken her share of the ogre money, so the rest was added to the larger pot for further divvying.

"Let's add this up."

"Kwee!"

Yoi and Mari spread their money across the table and divided the coins between them.

The adventurer's guild we worked at didn't have its own tavern, but there were plenty nearby. What I'm saying is, there were a lot of rich folks in this area, so I guess that made it safe to spread gold across a table in such a public place. I bet rich people do that all the time.

As we waited for them to split the reward, baby Basil tried to get a drink of beer like he'd seen everyone else do. I quickly stopped him. I didn't know what was okay for basilisks to eat, but more importantly, there was no way I was gonna risk getting my little buddy tanked.

"All right. Every share comes out to this," said Mari. "Sixteen gold Bulka coins and sixty-six silver."

"Ganjamary, this is yours, and this is miine, and this is yours, Mr. Slave!"

"Nishka, since we took you onto the team for the follow-up quest, I hope it's all right if we give you half the reward for that one, which would be fifteen gold, seeing as it was pretty much because of you that we succeeded."

"I won't say no to that."

Yoi split the money into piles on the table, which was when I realized they were putting part of it in front of me. Wait, me too?

"Um, Miss Yoi? I'm a slave, so...are you sure it's all right for me to take this money?"

"Of course, Mr. Slave! You're allowed to get paid for the value of your work!"

my young mistress explained, acting like there was no reason I should have expected otherwise.

But Mari cut in. “Actually, since you’re Yoi’s slave, she’s the one who gets the money. You’re paying her back for the money she spent to equip you, after all. Plus, she needs to be compensated for your food, and the equipment the party used, and rent...”

Mari counted each cost off on her fingers.

Cool, cool, cool, love to have adventuring buddies who keep me in actual bondage (the bad kind).

I’d been looking forward to going home and explaining the whole “me not being a slave anymore” idea to my sweet wife and maybe even getting to spend my own cash, but it wound up being a pointless fantasy.

“But the reward for this basilisk quest is a lot better than usual,” Mari finished, “so you can have this much for now. For spending money.”

“Th-thanks.”

“Just remember, slaves don’t usually earn this much. We’re doing this because you’re one of us, so be grateful. And be sure you’re a good servant for Yoi.”

“Th-thank you so much. I really appreciate this. It’s so great. Yay.”

Mari subtracted all the different expenses from my pot, then handed me what was left. That penny-pinching shrew—my fifteen gold shrank to five.

But that was still five gold I could add to Nishka’s, and all totaled it was more than enough to buy me from Yoi. I glanced over to Nishka. She met my eyes, then nodded.

I kind of wished I’d had time to give it more thought, but I figured it was better to get this whole thing over with rather than to keep putting it off. If I kept stalling, I’d just have more (semi?)fun memories with Yoi, and it’d be that much harder to leave. If I grew any fonder of my mistress, I would be in a real bind—you know, with the Stockholm syndrome and all.

So I nodded back to Nishka.

“By the way, guys,” she said. “I was thinkin’ about something. Whaddya think about this?”

“What is it, Nishka?” Yoi looked up, eyes wide and innocent.

“Here’s my preposition...”

(“*Proposition*,” muttered Mari.)

“I wanna buy your slave, by which I mean Shooter.”

Mari’s face tightened. She peered coldly at Nishka. “I’m sorry, what exactly do you mean by that?”

Nishka didn’t budge. “He’s a member of the Apegut settlement. He has a wife back in our village and a job entrusted to him by our chief. We can’t afford to have him idling away here in town.”

“You—Shooter! Is that what you want too?” Mari turned her glare on me.

“Yes, it is. I was told to find settlers and farmers for the village and recruit skilled adventurers, but to do that, I had to leave my new wife behind. I think it’s time for me to finish up here and go home.”

“You intend to betray Yoi?”

I blinked. How was this a betrayal? Come on, Mari! You’re from Japan, too! I’m a slave over here!

Granted, I knew I was lucky—for someone who had been, you know, a *slave*—to have this more or less sweet kid as my master. If it hadn’t been for the basilisk quests, I doubt I would have been able to earn enough money to pay back my purchase price so easily. But damn it, I wanted to go back to the village. I wanted to go home.

“I am beyond grateful that Miss Yoi purchased me. But it can’t go on forever. If you will allow it, Miss Yoi, I’d like to add this money you’ve given me to Nishka’s and buy my freedom.”

Yoi looked up at me, her sadness plain on her face. “You really mean it...?”

Mari scowled. “See? I told you not to be too nice to your slave.”

“But Mr. Slave, you said you would take care of me as I grow up.”

“He was obviously just saying that to butter you up.”

“Kwee.”

I was starting to feel incredibly uncomfortable—thanks, oncoming PTSD—so I took a gulp of the awful beer. It tasted even worse than before.

“I would be sad without you, Mr. Slave.”

“I’m glad you like having me around, Miss Yoi. I wish I didn’t have to leave you either, but that isn’t possible.”

“All you want is to go home, right?”

“I have a wife, miss. I know it’s a great deal to ask, but I’d like to return to her. I don’t want her to have to worry for me.”

“Buuuut...”

Oh boy...Yoi was crying.

“I guess if you refuse the money, there’s nothin’ we can do about it—legally speaking,” said Nishka. “But one way or another, I intend to free this man.”

Yoi just rubbed her eyes quietly.

“But hey, listen,” Nishka leaned in close, “remember how we said we’re here lookin’ for adventurers to come to our village? That’s true.”

“You...are?”

“Yeah. And I was thinkin’, if you’re interested, why not have you two come be those adventurers?” Nishka flashed a smile as she made her offer, then brought her tankard to her lips.

“I see,” said Mari, eyes narrowed. “What do you think, Yoi?”

“You want us to go to Apegut village?” Yoi asked, voice small but thoughtful.

“Don’t forget about the manor here, and the quests we’ve already agreed to. We wouldn’t be able to go right away. Those are factors you need to consider, too.”

“Um, okay! Yeah, once we finish what we’re doing here, we’ll go to Apegut village!” In a flash, Yoi went from brimming with tears to standing up on her

seat in excitement.

“Thank you so much,” I said. “Truly. On behalf of the villagers, please allow me to welcome you.”

“Hell yeah. This works out great, man! A good spellcaster is hell to find, whether we’re talking as adventurers or near our village. I found out on that ogre-huntin’ quest how valuable people consider them.”

“Yes, and Miss Yoi is certainly powerful.”

What a freaking relief. We settled the peace talks before our food even came out.

“Okay! I’ll hand Mr. Slave over to you, Nishka.”

“Great. How much d’you want for him?”

“I bought Mr. Slave for eighteen gold pieces, so that’s all I want back. We can go to the slave trader to update his slave contract tomorrow!”

Wait, what? I was gonna have to see that cretin with the ridiculously long name and the expensive vases? Lutbayasky or whatever? And just when I thought I was catching a break!

The following day, we all gathered at Yoi’s mansion.

“I figured we could go to the slave trader’s place, get the contract, and get him transferred to you!” Yoi announced, hugging Basil in her arms and gazing up at all of us.

Mari was lightly equipped, wearing her usual sleeveless dress encircled by a sword belt and some tall boots to match. Nishka the Scalesplitter, meanwhile, wore a leather vest over her blouse and her trademark hot pants. This time, she also sported thigh-high leather stockings. Yoi had on one of her frilly dresses as well as a pouch slung over her shoulder. As for me, I wore the clothes I’d worn during my blessedly soon-to-be-over stint as a slave: my vest and pants, as well as Ossandra’s sword at my hip. It was my look, you know?

I suppose the only big difference for any of us was that we all wore matching ponchos. We hadn’t decided to match as some sort of party uniform or

anything. We just bought them all at the same store, so they naturally wound up being the same.

“Slave traders shall update a slave’s contract or handle a transfer contract for free,” Yoi said aloud, carefully reading the complex law of the town from the parchment paper she held in one hand. “So say the regulations on the rights and responsibilities of slave traders that have been established in the name of the earl martial of Bulka!”

According to that paper, it was established by decree that consultations, contracts, and other matters related to slaves were to be handled by the slave traders without charge.

“They’re going to make a contract to transfer Mr. Slave and not make us pay, so I want to bring them something nice!”

It also seemed to be accepted practice to hand over a small bribe so that the contract got processed smoothly. Kinda pissed me off to hear that the miserable chucklefuck who tricked me into slavery was going to get “something nice” instead of, say, a royal ass-kicking.

“I’ll give Mr. Slave Trader this!”

Setting Basil down on the floor, Yoi picked up a small box and showed it to me. Mari didn’t have much of a reaction, so I guess she already knew what was inside. Nishka and I leaned forward to peer. A pot. Fine. Guess that made sense.

“Is this for that expensive-vase guy?”

“That’s right, Mr. Slave. You told me before how Mr. Slave Trader likes to collect expensive vases!” Yoi said cheerfully.

I cocked my head to one side, trying to remember when I had told her that. Maybe I grumbled something about it when I told her how the asswipe tricked me, but that was only to describe their underhanded technique.

A mean-spirited smile played over Mari’s lips. “Yoi made that vase with her earth magic.”

“Really? You made this?”

Meaning that this was a quintessential Yoi ewer. On closer examination, I saw

all sorts of patterns decorating the vase's surface. I was surprised to find it looked like a genuine work of art. A piece of parchment that looked a lot like a certificate of authenticity was stuck to the underside of the box's lid.

"Do you know what's written on that piece of paper?" asked Mari.

Nishka snorted. "Don't ask me, stupid. I dunno how to read."

Mari's cruel smile only grew more twisted. "That's a certificate of authenticity made in the name of the Order of Templars."

"What does it say?" I asked.

"Nothing important. Just verifies it's a 'holy vessel of the Goddess'—and all of those are just jugs passing themselves off as vessels that will expiate sin. They've become popular in the capital. People appreciate receiving them since they're made using soil from a holy site."

Huh, so Yoi turned some holy dirt into a vase with magic. Was the magic part important?

"It took some time to make this one. Yoi was using so much energy, wetting the bed was inevitable."

Yoi had a hand propped on her hip and wore a bashful grin while I quietly reassured her that she had nothing to be ashamed of.

Mari continued, "In order to make this just like the real ones, she had to painstakingly copy the equations for a magic circ—hey! Don't touch it!"

Nishka was reaching in to take the vase from the box when Mari rushed in to stop her.

"Jeez, don't be so fussy," Nishka grumbled. "What's wrong with a little look?"

"It's crafted in such a way that it could break easily. So absolutely do *not* touch it."

Nishka peered at Mari. "Why would you go to all that trouble? It's just a bribe, right?"

Plus, it would be a hassle if the gift we brought got broken before we gave it—or even just after we did. But then, considering the fact that Mari was still

smirking...was she plotting something?

“You could put it like that, I suppose. You see, there’s kind of a rivalry between slave traders and the Order of Templars.”

“What’s that mean?”

“The king has granted sole authority to the Order of Templars to oversee prostitution. We authorize it, and we provide treatments for venereal disease, contraception, and infertility. But wouldn’t you know it, the slave traders are dealing in enslaved prostitutes on the sly.”

A light bulb went off in my head. “Aha! You’re gonna use this contract update as a cover to pull off your trick. I’m loving what I’m hearing, but...what if something goes wrong?”

“Then this Lutbayasky can take it up with the Order of Templars. Because, you see, the earl of Bulka is well aware of our plan, and in fact, the command for the Templars to intercede with such scum came straight from the top.”

Well, well.

“And,” she continued, “this all just so happens to have been my idea. Yoi was only too happy to make the vase for us.”

At last, an evil smile crept onto Yoi’s lips as well.

Turned out, it wasn’t magic that made a vase valuable. It was alchemy. Mari also told us that they’d prepped this expensive vase so that when it broke, it would trigger one of her potions.

“What potion did you put in there?”

“An energy booster. *That* kind.” Gangi Mari said it so casually, but Yoi was gonna be there too! I don’t know if that was really something a kid should be seeing, especially after our recent adventures in the bath house, but...on the other hand, maybe revenge was a dish best served *hard*.

“*Kwee kweeee!*”

“Basil—don’t you dare break that vase before we can give it to the slave trader and let *him* deal with the pieces. Basil. *Basil!*”

Once we wrangled the lizard, we got on with the plan.

A while back, I had a job helping out someone who made a living in the secondhand market. That guy taught me a lot about life. The stuff we handled was referred to as “secondhand,” but we really dealt in antiques. My job was to go around to people’s houses and collect it, and my colleague always told me this: “Rich people don’t care about ‘stuff.’ They might get attached to it, but they definitely don’t care about it.”

At the time, I hadn’t yet turned thirty and I had no clue what he was talking about. What he meant was that “attachment” was being fond of something and not being able to forget it, whereas “caring” was being dedicated to something and treating it with respect.

When there was something a rich person wanted, they would get it because, hey, they wanted it. That was attachment. But after some time passed and they’d gotten a certain amount of satisfaction from having the thing, they didn’t think about it anymore. That was a lack of caring.

Rich people want without care, which makes ’em surprisingly gullible. Among the collections of old stuff hidden away in the storerooms of old mansions, we found a pretty large number of fakes. Apparently, if the rich old farts got told that this product here was great and then bought it, they figured, who cares? The wild thing was that they didn’t even check if they were buying anything real!

I bring this up because while I didn’t know how much slave traders earned, they sure didn’t seem poor.

“Well, well, well! I’m so very pleased you chose to come to my business.”

“Actually, Mr. Slave Trader, I was here a couple days ago.”

“And what can I do for you today, miss? I hope the slave I sold you the other day wasn’t careless in his work. Are you in need of an exchange? We have an excellent selection of merchandise available, so please feel free to peruse!”

Steepling his fingers, Lutbayasky Nupchsay Nupchakan took one look at my young mistress and approached her with a broad grin on his face. My stomach lurched. I couldn't look at him.

"That's not why I'm here. I actually want to give Mr. Slave to a lady I know. To this lady, actually. Nishka the Scalesplitter."

"That's me she's talkin' about," Nishka said, crossing her arms with her usual haughty confidence. "Nishka the Scalesplitter."

Lutbayasky looked bewildered. His henchmen, on the other hand, were more transfixed by Nishka's enormous and wiggly bosom. Mari noticed and looked sour but what man could stand against the sheer almighty power of what the great scholars call "The Nishkaboobage"?

One of the men gave Mari a wary glance. Hm—maybe they knew of her? She probably had quite the, uh, reputation, what with her attitude.

"Th-that's Nishka the Scalesplitter, all right..." the man stammered.

"Okay, are we gonna keep saying my name or get down to business? I'm takin' this slave for myself. You're gonna write up the transfer contract. But seein' as I can't read, I appointed this here lady as my witness." Nishka jerked her chin to indicate Mari.

Mari smiled. "I swear on the name of the Goddess that I will treat this duty with all the solemnity and impartiality that it deserves."

"Yeah, that. So let's get this over with."

Lutbayasky gestured for the women to sit on an opulent couch. Nishka plopped down and sprawled out like a bored cat. Yoi and Mari sat down next, and Lutbayasky sat down across from them. The henchmen and I took position standing behind our respective bosses.

"Of course, of course. Now, Miss Yoi, do you have the slave's deed?"

"Here you go, Mr. Slave Trader. I also have this." Yoi held out a piece of parchment and the small box she'd brought along.

"Hm. What is this, now?"

"We heard ya like collectin' vases, so we brought ya this as thanks for drawin'

up the transfer contract.”

“Oh, my goodness! How very kind of you! May I ask what’s inside?”

“It ain’t no ordinary vase, I’ll tell ya that. It’s a holy vessel made from the soil of a holy site. The baby girl and me wanted to convey our appreciation, see.”

“Please accept this as our thanks, Mr. Slave Trader.”

The box contained nothing more than a piece of Yoi-brand pottery, but Nishka did a great job talking it up; Lutbayasky accepted the box with an awed look on his face.

“May I—oh goodness, I can hardly—may I open it?”

“Do whatever you want. If you like it, it’s yours.”

“Oh my! It even has a certificate of authenticity. With the name of a priest of the Order of Templars in the capital! My, my, my...”

Nishka kicked back on the sofa and stretched one leg over the other, smirking like the self-confident, foul-mouthed Amazon she was. I could almost believe she was enough of a bigshot to get her hands on a real holy vessel.

“See how it glistens, how it shines and smiles in the light. Why, I can even feel a faint aura of magic in the vase!”

“That’s to be expected. It’s made from holy soil, after all.”

Boring old profane soil and a dash of Yoi’s magic. God, rich people really are a bunch of saps.

Mari maintained her prim posture and inclined her head to him. Lutbayasky nodded back in amazement.

“Why, this is simply delightful. What a marvelous vase! Was it terribly expensive?”

“I think it was right around eighteen gold for that one. Not a bad price, if ya ask me,” Nishka said, her nose stuck up in the air, despite the fact she’d come to town completely penniless.

And then—

“*HwaaCHOO!*” Nishka the Scalesplitter unleashed a huge, ridiculous sneeze

that would've seemed a little much in a goofy cartoon, let alone coming from the smirking mercenary she was playing. "Oops, sorry. Didn't mean to sneeze."

"What?!" In that instant, between the sneeze and the apology, the vase crumbled into dust in Lutbayasky's hand.

Nishka pouted. "Aw no, Mr. Lubricantosky, now you've really done it!"

"Oh," he muttered, dazed. "How terrible. I must have done something to break it." Lutbayasky Nupchsay Nupchakan looked down at the Yoi-brand pottery that had cracked to pieces in his hand, trying to come up with some excuse. He looked pretty rattled. The slimy slave trader's face was getting paler by the second.

A murmur was building among the henchmen who stood behind him.

"I must've done something to'—you kiddin' me? D'you have any idea how much that holy vessel cost?!" Nishka snarled, staring dragon-slayer daggers into the slave trader.

The intimidation tactic worked like a charm on Lutbayasky. The slave traders all flinched under Nishka's glare.

"Okay, look. We said we were givin' it to ya as a gift, so it's not really my business if ya break it or not. But you think you can just shatter a holy vessel and nothin's gonna happen?" Nishka asked, slowly leaning forward in her seat on the sofa and fixing her eyes on the slave trader sitting across from her.

On cue, Mari pushed her glasses back up and began to describe the consequences. "That vase was made from the soil of a holy place, through the dedicated efforts of a craftsman working in the name of the Order of Templars. It had the power to redeem sins. And a person can accumulate many sins during their lifetime, simply by living their lives."

"People are deeply sinful creatures," Yoi proclaimed solemnly. "I mean, I wet the bed today! Even though I didn't mean to."

"Precisely. That holy vessel had the power to wash a person clean of their

impure deeds. The Goddess granted it to us as proof of her mercy to those who have made offerings to her, and on behalf of those who beg her forgiveness. It has also become fashionable to offer such vessels as gifts to those one has a deep respect for, as happened in this case.”

The mood in the room darkened even further as Mari and Yoi traded off observations.

“So what does that mean? You sayin’ the Goddess isn’t going to forgive this guy since he broke the holy vessel of her forgiveness? Ha ha ha! Man, how can you mess up that bad? What a little dweeb!” Nishka guffawed and clapped her hands.

And there sat the slave trader, trembling feebly, the shards of Yoi-brand pottery falling through his fingers, glaring at us.

One of the adventurers who’d been eyeing Mari warily shouted a challenge. “Th-this was a trap! The vase broke the second that one-eyed lady sneezed. She musta used some kinda sneeze magic!”

“Sneeze magic?” Nishka crowed. “Oh, cool, *sneeze* magic. Hey jackass, do you know how stupid that sounds? Show me one person in the whole world with a magical sneeze! Pssh.”

“I-I mean, there’s you! How dare you try to embarrass Mr. Lutbayasky like that! These holy women musta been sent here by the Order of Templars!”

“Quit runnin’ yer mouth like ya got any clue what’s goin’ on! All we did was offer this nice man a gift we thought he’d like. So grow up a little and let the grown-ups do business, capeesh?”

The man shook with rage.

“Oh, boo hoo. You think I care what happened to that vase once I gave it to your boss? How’d you like to have a third asshole on top of the one you spout all your shit from and the one between your saggy butt cheeks? Or hell, I could tear you a fourth one on top of that. You’re just *ripe* with potential assholes!” Nishka the Scalesplitter thundered.

Several of the adventurers were reaching for the swords at their hips, as if ready to attack at any moment, but at those words they paused. Then moved

their hands away.

I looked back to the slave trader and—I blinked in surprise at how fast the potion was working—he was pitching a real Greatest Show on Earth in those his expensive silk pants of his. Mari’s “energy boost” potion was having an immediate effect.

As soon as she caught sight of Lutbayasky’s pants, Nishka cackled even louder and clapped her hands in delight. “Yeah, that tracks.”

“L-Let’s get those transfer documents written up for you.”

“But Mr. Lutbayasky, what about the Templar—”

“Never mind about that!”

“U-um, okay.”

“This is going to take a little time. Miss Yoi’hady, Miss Nishka...” The slave trader looked toward us with barely restrained rage and walked out of the room, the pants-tent wagging back and forth as he went.

Ice cold, getting a full chub in front of everybody was bad enough as it was—as I knew *very* well—but it must’ve been so much worse for our smooth operator with the long, dumbass name.

“The gang’s followin’ us, just like we expected,” Nishka announced a little while after we left the slave trader’s residence. She was the best hunter in our village, so it didn’t surprise me that she had eyes in the back of her head.

I was pretty sure that this was the back alley where the goons jumped me and sold me into slavery. What a nasty place; even in the middle of the day, a moldy miasma gushed from the alley gutters, and—I hadn’t noticed this the first time—a huge blind spot kept anyone on the main street from seeing this place. At least it was the time of day where sunlight penetrated the alley, so there were no drunk barmaids or sloshed louts in sight.

All was going according to the plan we discussed on the way to the slave trader’s house.

We were split up so that we could pretend to be easier to attack, me with

Nishka and Yoi with Mari. Once Mari and Yoi reached the main road, they'd run back around to summon up the rest of our plan. Meanwhile, with my slave rights freshly transferred to Nishka, she and I would act totally nonchalant and be on our way to the Sound of Joy Inn, where Nishka was staying. Nothing out of the ordinary had happened yet.

Meanwhile, Mari was headed to a nearby chapel to call on some colleagues from the Order of Templars. If everything went according to plan, this was going to be a perfect setup.

"What should we do?" I asked. "Do you want to move somewhere they can surround us and go at it there?"

Nishka sniffed. "Why bother? You're the best warrior in the village. I thought combat was your thing."

"Okay, yeah, but that whole 'maybe killing some people' thing? Haven't done it before, not real hyped!"

"C'mon, Shooter! I bet you can take those guys down without even getting your sword out."

"Please don't get us into trouble you want *me* to get us out of."

I had, after all, been caught unaware by those street thugs before, so I was, pardon me, a little nervous! It wasn't like I intended to let my guard down that day, but taking my eyes off of them for a single second was all it took for them to knock me out cold. I couldn't let them do anything like that this time. At least now I knew for sure those goons were gonna attack, so I had the time to mentally prepare.

"They're here."

"Well, I guess I'll handle them with my scabbard..."

I wasn't planning on going at my opponents with an actual blade, but I doubted Nishka intended to be similarly merciful. She nonchalantly whipped out her machete and swept her gaze around the alley, shouting, "Don't hide like that, boys! You think some nobodies like you can sneak up on the great hunter Nishka?"

Nishka twirled the machete around skillfully and turned to look back the way we'd come.

Several adventurers approached from that direction. And ahead, a group of nasty-looking hoods formed up to block our path.

"Country trash. You're gonna pay for making a fool out of Lutbayasky like that."

"The long-eared bitch with the huge tits is headed for slavery—but you, naked man? We're gonna slit your throat real slow-like, and then we're gonna piss on your grave. Get 'em!"

This guy—the street tough stereotype with the bad hair—was the very same guy who had popped me on the chin way back when. I hadn't seen him at the slave trader's earlier, so he must have been waiting nearby or working somewhere else.

"That's funny, 'cause I owe you guys something, too," I spat back. "Turn your calendar back, dipshit, because I'm gonna beat you into last week!"

The red-faced bald adventurer cried out, "You got some nerve!" and drew his sword on me.

At the same moment, I took a step toward him. Guy looked sloppy.

Back in the day, I won first place at a regional sword-fighting competition, but the next year I got eliminated in the first round. My opponent was a beginner and—while he looked soft—the guy had some previous martial arts experience, so I'd underestimated him.

Turned out the guy knew some kenpo. Kenpo guys will just come flying at you. I had the impression that it was a ferocious fighting style full of stances that lean forward, one where fighters will slam themselves into their opponents. They start off each match by facing each other and bowing, and as soon as it starts, the first thing they do is lunge in for their opponent's collar. But I acted way too sure of myself in my turn with this guy and clung to the numbskull idea that keeping my distance was the thing to focus on.

As soon as our match started, he closed that distance before I could get in a good stance to knock him off. He took me out in seconds.

This felt a lot like that. Reversed.

I drew my shortsword and, holding the scabbard in my left hand, I jabbed the scabbard at the bald guy and it landed right across his throat. It was glorious.

There wasn't any power behind my hit, though—if you jab someone in the throat when they're not expecting it, you'll kill them. I just stabbed the tip of the scabbard into his neck *ever* so slightly. That was enough to take out ol' red-faced baldy.

Mr. Tomato-Head knew a little hand-to-hand fighting, which I guess made him a little too confident.

Another opponent shouted, "I'll kill you!" or maybe, "I'll get you!" or something just as trite.

"Not today!" I snarled.

He moved like a complete novice. How did someone this inexperienced get a job as an adventurer?

The thug swiped his sword at me, but I parried the blow and slammed my fist into his gut in the same movement. I wasn't going for his stomach. I aimed straight for his ribs. One of the most basic strategies is to hit someone in a spot where they have no muscle.

But I was still nervous, deep down. As soon as I parried the man's strike with my scabbard, the scabbard slid farther than I thought it would and I nearly sliced my hand open. It's really hard to protect your hand without a hilt!

The man let out a weird noise like "Grooo!" and I slammed my fist still harder into his ugly face.

He slumped, I dropped him to the ground, and I squared up to the last two guys who yelled more generic combat dialogue. I think it was, "You'll pay for that!" Classic.

They looked terrified, like they had lost all their nerve, but they still thrust their swords out at me...and held them there, trembling.

I deflected their swords with a clash off my scabbard, then charged one of the guys, driving my shoulder into him. Pinned him against a wall.

The other one yelled something—or maybe he just screamed—as he lunged with his sword, but I dodged aside and he whacked the sword hard against the wall of the alley.

What pitiful technique. I grabbed a fistful of hair on the back of his skull and hammered his head against the wall five or six times. There we go. Now he knew what it was like to be a poor, chipped little sword.

That took care of my thugs. Now it was Nishka's turn. What techniques would she deploy against her fellow man? What savage blows could the great Amazon, this slayer of wyverns, rain upon these poor goons? Surely I was to witness something as unforgettable as it was haunting.

I turned around and saw the amber-skinned elf barbarian raising a whirlwind with her wind magic, cackling as adventurers tumbled in the air, buck naked and screaming.

“Ha ha ha! Shooter, look! They look like scraps of paper flyin' around!”

The wind magic had shredded their clothes—and their dignity—to pieces. They were totally incapable of attacking Nishka.

“Aiiiiieee! Please, let us go! We'll do anything!”

“Quit yer grumblin' and come at me! Let's see what you've got!”

And I thought the thugs were vicious.

Once Nishka the Scalesplitter released her wind magic, the naked adventurers fell to the ground in tatters and Nishka proceeded to whack each one with the flat back of her machete.

“What a savage...”

“I ain't a savage!” Nishka snapped, her massive rack swinging back and forth as she beat the men extremely savagely. “We're supposed to hate these guys, right? I'm doin' this for you, Shooter! We're gettin' revenge for *you*!”

“This is the Order of Templars! Throw down your weapons and go quietly, all of you!” Mari shouted as she swept into the alley like a swashbuckler.

The rumble with the slave trader's gang of adventurers was over.

I immediately threw my hands up in the air and declared I wouldn't resist. Nishka was much more laidback about it. All she did was lazily stop whacking the thugs with the blunt edge of her machete.

"You're a little late. We got tired of waitin' for ya, so we just started whalin' on 'em."

"I had to get the Templars stationed at the chapel and then go get the guards as backup. That took time!"

Mari was accompanied not only by what appeared to be several fellow Templars, but soldiers wearing yellow capes. The sentries guarding the gates into Bulka also wore yellow capes, so I guessed these were the earl of Bulka's soldiers.

"The Order of Templars and earl martial of Bulka have agreed to take joint oversight of Nupchakan's slave-trading operation," Mari declared. "They're going to take you lot away. Resist and you shall be cut down where you stand."

The sight of Mari tying the naked mercenaries up with rope, sunlight glinting off her glasses, struck me as both incredibly chivalrous and badass as hell. Maybe it would've been a bit more dashing if she hadn't been muttering stuff like, "Dickhead!" while tying them up, but hey. Who could blame her?

"Feel better now, Shooter?" Mari ribbed. "All the guys in this world have deformed penises, just like you. Look at that one—it's like a balloon animal trying to hump a Coke can."

"Yeah, yeah. Just get these guys out of here, please."

"We can leave that up to my colleagues here. I think some others are headed to the trade house with Yoi. With her witness testimony, that should be the end of Lutbayasky."

"What's going to happen to him?"

"Torture, probably. In time, he'll confess, admit to his crime, they'll put *him* into slavery, and thus karmic justice shall be served," Mari said to me with a wicked grin.

Yeesh. Like she always said, this world was not a kind one. No lawyers. Normalized torture. What if you were brought in on a false charge? I couldn't imagine anything worse happening, but...well, this was that unconscionable garbage-human Lutbayasky we were talking about, not some doe-eyed innocent. Even something this vicious still felt like mercy to me.

My revenge was complete.

Yoi finished transferring the slave ownership contract to Nishka without further issues, and so we began preparing for our return to the village in earnest. We were going home, but it wasn't going to be any ordinary homecoming.

The village outside Apegut Forest was recruiting hunters to replace those who had perished in the fight with the wyvern, and it was simultaneously in the middle of seeking new settlers to hasten the growth of the settlement. The adventurer's guild was also in negotiations with the village chief's stepson, Gimul, to open a guild branch in the village, and they were discussing the idea of stationing adventurers in the village permanently.

Gimul's original orders for me were to give a letter of recommendation to that first adventurer's guild branch we had visited, but so much had happened and I still hadn't managed to drop the letter off yet.

We sent my belongings and the baby basilisk to the Sound of Joy Inn, and Nishka and I headed to the guild, chatting about nothing in particular.

"You said there was a community of people from the village here. Did you ever manage to meet up with them?"

"Sure, there are people from the village here, but they're probably all goblins. Some apemen have a bizarre obsession with towns."

"Is that so?"

"Yep. If they stay in their villages or surrounding settlements, they just get used for hard labor. But skilled goblins want to better their fortunes same as anybody, so they always want to head into town."

Now that she mentioned it, I was pretty sure Wak'wakgoro had said something similar. Once a goblin became a veteran hunter like Wak'wakgoro, no doubt they thought it would be way easier to make a living as an adventurer in town. I wondered how it actually went for them? I didn't get the feeling Wak'wakgoro had any real positive feelings for towns or the goblins who left for them. Why was that?

It sounded like Nishka nursed a similar kind of disdain when she talked about them.

"Now that you're here, have you ever thought about just staying in town, Nishka?"

"Why would I do that? I'm only here 'cause I gotta be."

"But what about all the places in town where you can get those drinks you like so much?"

"Yeah, yeah, there's lots of good drinkin' here. They've got beer, and brandy, and it's all so—oooh, it's so *yummy*. Their whisky and wine are pretty gross, though. Still," Nishka broke off. She proudly puffed up her bountiful bosom and continued, "Can you imagine how boring that'd get after a while? I'm a hunter, and a hunter needs somethin' to hunt. And I don't hunt drinks—I hunt wyverns. Sometimes I have to go after deer or bears to make a living, but still."

"That's such a Scalesplitter thing to say."

"Aww, you think so? If you get a crush on me, you're gonna wind up gettin' hurt. 'Cause those feelings are gonna make you go out on wyvern hunts with me," Nishka laughed heartily, her ludicrously gargantuan breasts bouncing with each "ha!"

"If you think about it, now that I'm your slave, wouldn't I have to go with you on all your wyvern hunts from now on anyway? Regardless of my feelings for you?"

"Don't be stupid. You're a married man." She paused thoughtfully. "Actually, I wonder how that works now. The law says I'm obligated to take care of you, don't it?"

"Thank you so much, Nishka. I'm beyond indebted to you. My wife and I

throw ourselves upon your gargantuan, soft, bouncing, uh...generosity.”

“Hmph. I’ll talk to Wak’wakgoro once we get back to the village.”

In the course of our conversation, we reached the guild.

Nishka went up to the guild’s reception desk and waved to one of the girls. I guess they knew each other? The girl seemed to recognize Nishka, too. She looked pleasantly surprised and bowed her head.

Nishka walked straight over to her. “Hey, how’ve ya been? I’ve been helpin’ out over at the branch office, so I haven’t been able to make it over here for a couple days.”

“I was worried about you, Nishka! Were you able to meet up with your naked warrior friend?”

“Yup! This is him.”

“Oh?”

Nishka was grinning, but the girl had a funny look on her face.

“What’s up? You know his deal, right?”

“Oh yeaah! Now I remember. He came in with Mr. Gimul before, didn’t he? So much of his skin is covered up now, I didn’t even recognize him!”

The woman leaned over the counter and scrutinized me from the tips of my toes to the very top of my head. Here I was with pants and a poncho, but back then, I was just wearing a vest and loincloth. Weirdly, that thought made me sad. My pants had slid up my butt crack, so I adjusted them to get my little dude some breathing room.

“Hello, miss. I hope you’ve been well.”

“Oh, th-th-thank you. I’m so glad to see you doing well...? Ha. Um. Oh dear, but that piercing in your belly button...”

“Yeah, I’ve been through a bit of trouble and, long story short, I ended up as Nishka’s slave. Oh! Please don’t tug on the piercing...”

“Oh, I’m very sorry.” The receptionist withdrew her hand in embarrassment and looked back to Nishka. “Ah, but how can I help you two today?”

“Can you take a look at this? I dunno what it says, but Gimul said that since there are some settlers from Apegut Forest here in town, we should get in touch with ’em at the guild.”

“Here, let me see it.” The receptionist took the letter of recommendation Gimul had written up from Nishka. The wax seal on the parchment was already broken. She carefully unfolded the letter and brought it closer to her face. “Ah yes, I see. Your village chief has relatives here in town, and they live in a very affluent neighborhood. This says that one of them is an adventurer and if you run into any trouble, to go call on them.”

“Whoa, they’re an adventurer, too?”

“It also says that another relative left the homeland to earn money in the craftsmen’s district and now owns several tenement houses. Both are goblins.”

So Nishka was right, it was a community of goblins from the Apegut village.

“Could you tell us the name of the goblin adventurer? We have a contact in the more affluent district who is also an adventurer, so there’s a chance our acquaintance knows them,” I told the receptionist, thinking of my former mistress, Yoi.

“Let me check. Hmm...the name is hard to pronounce...” She peered at the parchment. “Someone named Y...Yoi’hady Jumei.”

Nishka and I nearly spoke at the same time.

“What? It’s Miss Yoi?”

“The baby girl? Seriously?”

The receptionist blinked. “I’m sorry? I-Is that the person you know?”

“Yeah. She’s the one who owned Shooter before me.”

“Yes. She used to be my master.”

At the word “master,” I saw the receptionist’s eyes glance down at my belly-button piercing. Everyone loves the sexy piercing, eh? It’s enough to make a grown man blush.

“I-I apologize. Please don’t tell your master that I said her name was difficult

to pronounce.”

“Certainly not. Consider it forgotten.”

“There’s actually a bit more in this letter. It says when you’ve gotten everything in order to send a group of settlers to the village, please notify them by letter.”

“I see. Thank you.”

I suppose that when Gimul said to send a letter, he meant for us to send one with a messenger pigeon from the adventurer’s guild. I thanked the receptionist and accepted the parchment back from her.

“You’re quite welcome. We will continue advertising for settlers, too, of course. As of right now, we’ve had...hm...oh yes! One hundred people express interest in the posting. If you could let me know a date you prefer, I can arrange for everyone to gather here. Gimul asked me to hire adventurers as escorts and send them out to the village with you.”

“Wow! A hundred people have answered?”

“That’s great! That means we’re done here, and we can go back home.”

“Then let’s get started. When should we set the date to meet them?”

Nishka and I jumped right into talking next steps. I couldn’t believe it was finally happening!

“If you can give me a few days’ notice, I’ll be able to contact everyone. Those hundred people are merely the ones who expressed an interest. I can’t say for sure whether they will all want to actually move out there.”

“That’s fine. Do you have any news about the hunters?”

“Let me see...unfortunately, the response on that front has not been so prolific. It would appear that only one person has thrown their hat in for the job.”

Oof. Not nearly as many as I hoped. I nodded thoughtfully and borrowed a quill from the receptionist in order to take notes on the back of the letter of recommendation.

“Hey, I thought you said you couldn’t write!”

“I don’t know how to read or write the letters of *this* land. I can manage to make notes for myself, though. More importantly, what should we do about the hunters? There are fewer candidates than I thought we would get.”

“Why can’t we just pick some good ones out of the settlers and teach ’em how to be hunters? Some of the villagers have caught stuff like rabbits before. They could learn,” Nishka offered. It was a reasonable compromise.

“That makes sense. In that case, can you please have them gather here in three days’ time? Will that work?” I asked the receptionist.

“Will do, sir.”

“That just leaves the adventurers...”

Which wouldn’t include Yoi and Mari at first—they had a quest coming up soon that they couldn’t cancel, though I knew they’d come along after that. But what to do for the next few days?

“Has anyone volunteered for that? It isn’t as though we’re asking them to stay in the village forever.”

“There have been a few adventurers who said they would escort the new settlers as long as they didn’t have to stay in the village permanently. The rest will depend on budget negotiations, I suppose. Also, the guild is going to send an adventurer out to run the new branch in your village.”

“Excellent. That’ll save us some trouble.”

Nishka gave a perfunctory “great,” as if she couldn’t be bothered with any of this, then looked at me. We decided to get back together in three days’ time to meet the candidates for immigration and the representative for our new guild branch.

“It’s pretty wild that the village chief and Yoi are related though, huh?”

“Yeah. But then again, Wak’wakgoro told me that the village chief was from somewhere else before she married into the village. I guess this explains that ‘somewhere else.’”

“Ya think so? I s’pose we can just ask Yoi to get the whole story.”

We were already headed for Yoi’s mansion so that we could write to the village chief and let her know what was going on, so why not? Still, I wished Gimul had told me about literally anything sooner. What a tease. “Hey, Nishka?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you know why goblin names all have that weird pause in them?”

“I suppose it’s because they’re all from the ‘*glp!*’ tribe.”

“Uh.”

“Hey, don’t look so skeptical at me! It’s true! I’m sure of it! Like, ninety percent sure. Ninety percent of thirty percent!”

So she’d just made it up and decided that it might as well be true. Ah, Nishka...

“Whaaaat? You *really* know Dricia, Mr. Slave?” When I showed Yoi the letter of recommendation Gimul had given me, her glittering eyes practically popped out of her head.

“That’s right, Miss Yoi. I didn’t expect it, either. Would you mind telling me how our village chief is related to you?”

“Dricia’s my auntie. But she gets mad when I call her that because she says it make her feel like an old lady, so I just call her Dricia.”

“Wow. She’s really your aunt...”

With a few more questions, we found out that the chief of the settlement outside Apegut Forest originally lived in a village near town, and her mother was from a community of spellcaster goblins living in the city.

To wit: the village chief and my former mistress were aunt and niece. Yoi and Gimul were cousins.

“You guys look nothing alike.”

“No duh, Shooter. The village chief is Gimul’s *stepmom*, remember?”

“Oh yeah! Then I guess the only thing Gimul has in common with a goblin is what a hulking mountain of a guy he is.”

“Anyway,” said Yoi, interrupting our erudite conversation, “I didn’t know Dricia was a village chief out in a frontier settlement.”

“Hey, hold on a sec, baby girl.”

Nishka and I exchanged a look. I was sure I’d been told that Alexandricia married into the village ten years ago. Did that mean...Yoi was only pretending to be a little girl, and was actually a lot older? Was this one of those gross “really 700-years-old” things?

“Pardon me for asking, Miss Yoi.”

“What is it, Mr. Slave?”

“May I ask how old you are?”

“I’m nine!”

Thank God. She was a real kid. But then, when had Yoi met the village chief? That was an issue.

“Have you ever met Alexandricia, Miss Yoi?”

“Mmhm! It was five years ago. Dricia came to town to talk to some special person, and I met her then.”

“And that was the first time you had ever seen her?”

“That’s right. She had a real big kid with her. That’s when I accidentally called her auntie.” Yoi trembled, as if just remembering the slip of her tongue was bringing back some nasty social anxiety. Why do we always remember that stuff? As for the giant son, that must’ve been Gimul. I could imagine assuming Alexandricia was an older lady if you knew she had a kid his age.

But the village chief must’ve really let Yoi have it for implying she was an ‘auntie’ instead of a ‘miss.’ If we were talking five years ago, that meant Alexandricia would have been just over twenty-five, which I suppose is pretty hard to read if you’re just a kid yourself.

“You want me to write a letter to Dricia, Mr. Slave?”

“If you don’t mind, please. We would greatly appreciate if you could tell her that we’ll be bringing a group of settlers back to the village with us three days from now, along with some adventurers working as escorts for the group—temporary residents, nothing more—as well as one new hunter.”

My former mistress nodded seriously. “Got it. Settlers going back in three days. Some adventurers escorting you who are going to stay in the village. One hunter.” She pulled a scroll of hemp paper from a jar on a nearby shelf and brought it back to us along with a small writing desk. From the desk she took a quill and ink, then she hunched over and began to write the letter.

“Three days from now, settlers depart. Adventurer escorts will stay in village. One hunter. Mr. Slave and Boobsy are doing well...”

“Hey, girl! Did you just call me ‘Boobsy’?”

“Hmm? Oh no, Nishka, never. You must’ve misheard!” Yoi folded the paper and held it out to me. I could tell she was trying hard to act cheerful for me.

“Where is Mari?”

“She had temple work to do, so she’s at the chapel. I’m all alone at home today.”

“That’s very grown-up of you, Miss Yoi.”

“He he.”

I stroked Yoi’s hair and my former mistress looked pleased, but an instant later her face turned desolate again. “Are you sure you won’t forget about me, Mr. Slave?”

“I could never possibly do such a thing, Miss Yoi. My master may have changed, but in my heart, I will always belong to you.” Wait, what was I *saying*?

Nishka looked pretty shocked, too, but she was nice enough not to say anything.

Yoi nodded. “There’s a job I have to do, so I can’t go back to your village in Apegut Forest with you...but when our scheduled quest is over, I’ll come to you.”

“I deeply appreciate that, Miss Yoi. And please tell Mari that I earnestly hope

she will also become a resident adventurer in the village going forward.”

“Okay, I will.”

We clasped hands, then departed Yoi’s mansion.

“You okay?” asked Nishka. “We got outta there quicker than I expected.”

“I don’t know, I guess I just didn’t want to drag it out. I’m just...sad, y’know? And it’s not like we’ll never see each other again.”

“Ah, gotcha. I was worried there.”

“About what exactly?”

Nishka’s expression became unusually solemn as we exited into a bustling street. We were planning to go shopping for all the things we would need for our trip home.

“About Yoi, of course. She looked pretty burned up. I think she’s got a huge crush on you, old man.”

Ugh, kids. “Miss Yoi is the grand old age of nine. I’ll be decrepit by the time she’s old enough to even know what a crush *is*.”

“Ya look younger than you are, though. So when she’s the right age, I bet you’ll have aged like a, what’s the sayin’, a fine cheese. Maybe with a little fungus on it, definitely smelly.”

Now I was *getting* a little cheesed. “That’s not funny. I have a brand-new wife waiting for me back in the village!”

“Good, keep yer eye on the prize. If ya start talkin’ about gettin’ new wives this soon after ya got married, Cassandra would be pretty mad.”

“I wouldn’t blame her!” Wait, hold up. New wives? Did that mean... “Uh, question. Do we, uh, do bigamy around here?”

“Depends. You rich? Because more wives gives ya more taxes.” Her eyes lit up. “Oooh! Oooh, you should marry the village chief! Land that hottie and you won’t have to pay taxes at all!”

Yeah, it did sound like a rich people thing. Whatever—after all this mess, I was looking forward to a nice, calm newlywed life!

Nishka and I did lots of shopping in the few hours we had left in town. For one, I wanted a few more changes of clothes. I knew better than to rely on one; as soon as my good clothes got ripped, I'd wind up being buck naked again. We went around to different secondhand stores and I bought up all the clothes I could, just so there wouldn't be a repeat of the Loincloth Incident.

Nishka bought a few blouses in her usual style, but these were all new and not yellowed with age like her current one. I also bought some cloth for Cassandra. And while I was at it, hey, why not some apple cider vinegar and honey for cooking? That sounded like a nice wife-type thing.

When the third day came at last, we gathered at the branch office of the adventurer's guild in the morning. Before heading over to where all the settlers were standing, we met up with Nishka's receptionist friend.

"I'd like you to meet someone. This is the fellow being dispatched to the Apegut Forest settlement."

"Hey there. Name's Camulla."

"I'm Shooter. I hope to get to know you better."

"And I'm Nishka the Scalesplitter. Look forward to workin' with ya."

Basil scampered around my feet, weaving in circles. Nishka picked him up for me, then he turned to look at us.

"Kwee!"

"Oh yeah, this is my baby basilisk. His name's Basil. Don't worry, he's a good boy. Aren't you, little dude? He won't bite."

"Y-you've got a b-basilisk?" asked Camulla.

"That's right. He's, um, a basilisk. Basil the Basilisk. Get it?"

"Gweeee!"

"Um, p-pleased to meet you, Basil." Camulla stammered.

With Basil wrangled, I finally got a good look at the guy: He was a handsome middle-aged man, equipped with your standard chainmail armor. With his

cobalt blue eyes framed by chiseled features and capped by brown hair, he had the face and the grace of a Hollywood actor, maybe even movie-poster material.

As soon as we shook hands, I got an inkling of how capable he'd be. Even as we greeted each other, he was mindful to keep his stance open, his body half-turned, ready for any situation that might arise.

Now, I used to build sets for a comedy theater. More than half the people working there were either part-timers like me or young folks chasing a dream. One of the guys was a boxer. He worked during the day, then clocked out to hit the gym and pursue his true passion. I remember how hard he worked every single day in pursuit of his dream to win an Eastern championship or some other title.

One day, while he was waiting at a light to cross the street, I saw him unconsciously drop a foot back to open into a half-turned stance. He'd almost been in a traffic accident at some point, he said, so he was careful to always be ready to respond to anything.

Just a couple days later, he proved it. The guy was working on building a portable platform and dropped the planks for the base on his leg. He could have broken his leg, but he instantly pulled away and managed to get out without a scratch...at which point he got a girl pregnant, got married, and traded boxing for play-fighting with his five-year-old. Maybe he could still play pretend Eastern champ?

The handsome Camulla had that same readiness (and hopefully wasn't trying the pull-out method). We were lucky to land such a great guy to help our little village.

"Now let me introduce you to the settlers. Gimul asked the adventurer's guild to ready provisions and whatever else they might need on the trip. That's all been taken care of."

Hollywood hunk Camulla, Nishka, and I followed the receptionist as she showed us our wards for the trip.

When it was time to get underway, I whispered to Nishka, "What do you think of this guy?"

Nishka's response was unexpected. "Which one of you's got more talent, huh?"

"Come on, are you already thinking about that? I'd guess we're at around the same level. Though Camulla probably has me outright beat on combat experience."

"Hmm. You think so, huh?" Nishka crossed her arms over her breasts and fell into a thoughtful silence.

With our six guild adventurers acting as escorts, we departed from Bulka.

Out of the one hundred or so applicants to move out and become settlers, we wound up with eight families totaling about forty people, plus a couple of young guys. Adding in the goblin laborers and enslaved former criminals the guild arranged for us, plus the one hunter, our party came to about eighty folks total. The receptionist who headed up the project coordinated all of it, and I felt bad for all the work she had done on our behalf.

"I'm so sorry we couldn't get all the applicants organized ourselves," I said, bowing my head to her. But she promised that she would keep putting out calls for settlers every so often and send them out to us.

I couldn't judge whether the number of settlers we were bringing back was a lot or not, but it seemed like a pretty big caravan.

As we wound our way to the eastern gate of Bulka, that same yellow-cloaked guard was waiting for us. He confronted us with an annoyed tone. "Not you again. When you first came to Bulka, you were a backwater hick, then I see you at the western gate and you somehow managed to get enslaved. Now here you are, marching out of town leading a parade of immigrants. Could you just sit still for one second?!"

"I'm just glad we were able to get this many people together. I'll be proud to report this to our village chief. Thank you so much for your kind attention. Truly, you have my deepest appreciation."

I handed the guard the list of settlers' names and their papers, and also showed him my two adventurer tags, just in case. One tag was the one I always

carried in lieu of ID, and the other was the one that was supposed to be kept at the guild where I was registered.

Nishka and I were residents of Apegut, whereas Camulla the hunk and the other escorts would be basing their adventurer operations out of Apegut for a bit, so we all recovered our second tags from the guild and were bringing them to the new branch office in the village.

“Once I finish checking your documents, you better get outta here, and I mean it.” Then the guard paused, leaned in toward me, and whispered. “I, uh. I don’t like the way that long-eared savage glares at me.”

I smirked but bowed, then jogged to the back of the retinue where Nishka and Hunk Hollywood waited.

“All right, everyone!” I called out. “We’re ready to go! We’ll take it slow, but I want you to listen to any instructions the escorts give you. If anyone feels unwell, please don’t hesitate to let one of us know.”

At last, we departed with our new settlers. We advanced toward the village at a leisurely pace, going back down the road we traveled so long ago in the other direction. We planned for a journey of five days total. It was longer than we’d taken on our way into Bulka, but we needed that much extra time for the huge number of settlers. Plus, our caravan included people traveling on foot.

There were families with household goods loaded onto horse-drawn carts, but the majority of the settlers pulled their carts themselves. Elders and children took turns sitting in open spaces in the carts. The goblin laborers and the slaves were helping out, but that wasn’t going to speed things up much.

“So, Shooter is it?” Camulla spoke up, some time after we left Bulka. His teeth glistened in the morning sun; he really was the Ferrari of people. “We’re making this trip with settlers who aren’t accustomed to travel. I think it would be best to call it a day and set up camp soon.” It was a good observation—he paid attention to how the caravan was moving, and clearly knew how to handle a large group of people.

“I think you’re right. Staying at an inn would be ideal, but that’s obviously impossible.”

“It would be tough to arrange with this many people. No inn would have enough rooms, and the cost would be obscene. You and I are adventurers; we’re used to such things. But not these folks.”

I spotted farm workers and traveling merchants on the road, marveling at our long train of immigrants. If they were villagers from Apegut, I could understand them watching this line of strangers so warily, but traveling folk should have been more worldly.

“What’s their problem? I wish they’d quit starin’ at us,” Nishka muttered.

“There’s been a lull in immigration to the frontier lately, so it’s probably unusual to see such a large group heading in this direction. Not to mention, we’ve got a certain beautiful, long-eared young lady with us, so we have to expect them to take notice of such an angelic figure.”

According to Camulla, lands on the frontier recently shifted focus from expanding territory to managing what they had, so it was less common for borderlands villages to take in new settlers. Apegut was the exception.

That made sense. An endlessly increasing population wasn’t a great idea in most places; if you ran out of unclaimed land to till, you’d inevitably run into disputes with the leaders of adjacent territories.

But Nishka responded to a different part of Camulla’s words. “Ya hear that, Shooter? He said I’m a beautiful young lady! Angelic, even!”

“Yeah, yeah, what an angel.”

“You’re being sarcastic, aren’t you? Ya jerk. Come here and say that to my face!”

I tried to placate Nishka, but that only made her explode at me, so I avoided her until we could pick a good time to start setting up camp.

“Some of our people are armed—if we camp too close to a village with all these weapons, that could ruffle some feathers in the local leadership. Let’s find somewhere a little farther away.”

“Good thinking. Should we find somewhere near a water source to set up?”

“Kwee!”

Counting Nishka and myself, we had eight adventurers in the party. To a local leader, that would look like a pretty intimidating fighting force.

As I talked the plan over with Camulla, I swung my wooden rack backpack off and opened the basket lid. The baby basilisk poured out of the basket and began to run around at my feet. He'd been cooped up in there the whole time we were on the move, and was likely bored out of his little lizard mind.

He wandered through the crowd of families and adventurers who were starting to make camp, saying hello to everyone and making friends. It surprised me to see how tame he was around humans. Or maybe he thought he was a human himself?

"Basil, get back here! You stay with me and stop getting in everyone's way."

"Kwee kwee pthhb!"

Ignored by my own child, as usual. Ah, the trials and tribulations of parenthood.

Basil swung back around to look me defiantly in the eye. It looked like he was planning to make a break toward one of the adventurers who stopped to watch the scene unfold.

"Could you listen to a single thing I say?" I grumbled, but I squatted down and reached out a hand toward him, trying to lure him back.

But just as I did, one of the adventurers crouched to fawn over my recalcitrant kid. "Aren't you a cutie? What's your name, little fella? I've never seen anyone keep a chubby little frilled lizard like you as a pet before."

"His name's Basil."

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Basil. You said he's a baby? That means you're gonna grow up to be the size of a horse! I hope your owner has started stockpiling food for you!"

I'd seen Basil's parents, and they definitely weren't the size of a mere horse. But I didn't want to get into the details of that story, so I just gave the adventurer a pained smile. Some of the other adventurers came over and started petting Basil, taking turns cuddling him in their arms.

“Gwee! Gwee! Gweeee!”

“Were all of you nominated by the guild in Bulka for this mission?” I asked as Basil cooed and blurped.

“We’re not as famous as the boss, Camulla. When we heard there was a long-term job that could keep us fed, we volunteered. That’s all.”

“Oh, sorry to pry. We don’t have much in our village, but our chief is quite the looker. You’ll have that to enjoy as she orders us around, at least.”

One of the adventurers broke into a grin. “There was so much going on when we set out, I don’t think we got a chance to introduce ourselves. I’m Folgo, and these are my buddies Alex, and next to him is Knai. Then over there—”

I coaxed Basil back into my arms as Folgo formally introduced all the adventurers.

“Nishka told us all about you while we were on the road,” he said. “She said you’re not just any ordinary buck-naked slave.”

“Yeah, said yer from some kinda tribe that reveres nudity,” said another adventurer. “That true? Kinda wondered if you’d have any junk at all for uh, philosophical reasons.”

“And we heard how talented you are—how you managed to take out a wyvern and some basilisks? Whew. The hero of Apegut is a cut above the rest even if he is totally naked, huh, boss? Bwa ha ha!”

What had Nishka been saying to these people...? I mean, none of it was wrong, per se, but I still felt humiliated. I adjusted Shuta Jr. and just smiled at them whenever it seemed like the time to be a Buff and Cheerful Hero.

At length, we gathered around the campfire for some freshly made soup and preserved biscuits, then we all turned in early.

The next morning, I rose at daybreak. The weather promised to be great for travel, albeit with some cloud cover overhead. Our journey that day brought us to a village outside the gates of a prosperous monastery, where travelers and merchants milled through the village center. Around the monastery, I spotted people wearing religious garb similar to what Mari’s colleagues wore, no doubt

because this was a religious institution operating under the auspice of the Order of Templars.

We spent another night camped out in the field, and on the afternoon of the third day we reached a village at a three-way crossroad in the highway.

“You go straight north from here and you’ll hit our hometown. I dunno where the road south goes, but there’s wild dogs that come right up it every once in a while.”

While Nishka regaled everyone with this explanation, her ample chest was puffed out importantly. She might as well have said we were headed straight to Nowheresville.

The instant the group of immigrants set out down Bulka’s highway in the direction of Apegut, the scene turned bleak. From here on out, it was all endless grasslands and dense groves of hungry trees.

While the sun was still high in the sky, we could see a handful of figures working in small fields along the roadside, but we didn’t encounter anyone who lived in the nearby settlements before we set up camp for the night.

Just when everyone was convinced that the dull scenery would continue yet another day, we encountered a group in travel attire riding in a wagon drawn by a single horse, coming toward us on the other side of the road. A rare sight in these parts, but since we hadn’t run into so much as a wild dog on our journey out, I found myself staring at the group in the cart.

The road received the least possible amount of maintenance, and we were all crowded onto it; there were eighty in our group and only a handful in theirs. They pulled onto the shoulder to allow our group to pass, and we waved to them as we went by.

“Oh, please don’t mind us. We’re simply on our way back from market, heading to Bulka to sell off the last of our cargo.”

“You were on a sales trip?”

“Yes, we sell salt to nearby villages and buy their local goods in exchange, then sell the goods wholesale in Bulka.”

“Do you go to Apegut village, too? It’s just a bit farther down this road.”

“Why, of course we do! Every village is happy to buy salt, no matter the price. Of course we stopped in at Apegut,” the salt merchant explained with a broad grin, casting a look back over the goods loaded in his cart.

It was crammed with all sorts of local merchandise, which the merchant kept covered with a fur sheet. The only things I could imagine Apegut selling anyone were wyvern bones and leather, but Nishka and I had just gone to Bulka to relieve our stock of those.

“Hey, Shooter? If these salt merchants went all the way to the village, why’d they make us go into town to sell our shit? It was a huge pain.”

“Ha! And perhaps if the merchants had come a bit sooner, I...oh. I guess I would’ve never been forced into slavery, huh...”

“I mean, Bulka treated me all right, so I don’t have a ton to complain about. But still.”

I got the feeling she thought our trip had been a massive waste of time. Meanwhile, Nishka’s whispered question prodded an unexpected sore spot for me, and I began to feel despondent. I supposed being a traveling merchant seemed like a pretty tough way to make a living, and I guess they couldn’t come around too often, but...damn. If only.

While the merchants continued to regard Nishka and me with unwaveringly pleasant smiles, I could make out fresh scars on their faces. It looked like they’d seen their fair share of the business end of a blade. I suppose thieves had to be a problem during their trips, but I wasn’t about to ask for the deets—not after just meeting them.

The salt merchants were dedicated, at least. They asked the families heading to the settlement with us whether there was anything they still needed. The only one who bought anything was hunky Camulla.

Once everyone settled in around the dinner pot and started eating, he came over to chat with me. “We’re running a little behind schedule, but it looks like the families are all in good health.”

“Yeah, we’ve been lucky to make it this far without any incidents. I feel like a

weight has been lifted from my shoulders.”

“And the road’s been peaceful the whole way from town. No robbers, no kobolds, no nothin’!” Nishka declared.

I’d met my share of well-trained adventurers, but Camulla was in a separate class. He had a real no-nonsense vibe. Even if we were attacked by robbers, I doubted I’d feel a moment’s hesitation with him around. Not that I wanted a demonstration—I was happy enough just gazing at him and assuming he had his shit together.

“You heard how a large group of ogres appeared near Bulka a few days back, right?” he asked. “With all that going on, I was a little worried something similar might happen to us.”

“Ah yes, that business. I made a good bit of money off that,” I said.

“Kwee!”

Camulla nodded. “Oh yeah...I think I saw you during that quest, didn’t I, Shooter?”

“Mmweee!”

Basil was scampering about, twining around and between Nishka’s legs. She hoisted him up in her arms. His face was immediately buried in her bountiful bosom, and he seemed perfectly content.

Being reminded of the ogre quest got me nervous too, honestly, but then I remembered the farming villages who put in the request for help were on the opposite side of Bulka from Apegut, so Camulla was probably worrying unnecessarily. I told him so.

“Maybe. We can’t afford to get complacent, though. We still haven’t determined why that tribe was on the move. Before I left the guild, I heard they were dispatching parties of adventurers to conduct a thorough sweep of the area.”

“Oh! That might be the quest Gangi Mari and Miss Yoi stayed in town for! They said it had something to do with ogres,” I said.

Camulla raised an eyebrow shrewdly and asked, “You’re acquainted with the

holy maiden of the Order of Templars, I take it?”

Acquainted? Uh. That was one word for it, I guess. I could say we were from the same country, but Mari had popped into this world buck naked in a temple. That seemed a lot more mystical than just showing up, dong-a-danglin’, in the middle of a forest.

Was that more mystical? We’d gotten separated before we even had a chance to debate whether we’d been transported to this world or reborn here.

I didn’t know how to answer him. I fiddled with my belly-button piercing and replied evasively, “We used to be in the same adventuring party, but it was just temporary. I was her partner’s slave.”

“Ah, I see. That explains the piercing. And now I suppose you belong to Nishka?”

“That’s right. Nishka and I are from the same village, after all, so she was kind enough to buy me so I could go back home.”

“Oof. Sounds like you’ve been through a lot yourself,” the handsome lug said, tousling his luscious golden-brown hair with one hand.

Heh. If he kept that up, he’d be liable to turn someone on.

Anyway, it was time to run away from him into the dark, because the light of the campfire playing over his beautiful Hollywood features was giving me major heartburn. So, you know, I had to be somewhere else. And pretend very loudly that I had business in that other direction.

“Hold on, I’ll go with you,” I heard a reedy voice call from behind me.

It was the lone hunter who had come along with the settlers. Animal ears stuck up from his (I think “his”) short silver hair, and he had a tail. I couldn’t help thinking he looked exactly like an adolescent girl, but according to him, he was a guy. And if he wanted to go along with me to relieve himself, that was just more proof that he was all boy all the way, you know?

He came up alongside me, his expression completely unreadable. I had no idea what was going through his mind, but I decided not to worry about it.

The two of us went into the bushes. I untied my pants, then lowered them,

feigning disinterest. Beside me, the young man deftly undid the buttons on the front of his pants. They were really more like hot pants, but anyway...

We were in the dark, so I didn't think I was going to see anything, but I caught a glimpse of his li'l guy. It was so cute!

A faraway look still in his eyes, the animal-eared guy glanced at me and mumbled, "If you keep looking around like that, I'm going to get embarrassed."



I coughed loudly at nothing. “Y-you’re right, sorry. Strong and silent only works if I’m strong!”

There, that sounded deep! I guess! And oh, hey, cool, it was time to run again.

We’d fallen a bit behind schedule and it was now late in the morning on the sixth day.

“Hey, look there! I can see the mountains where the wyverns nest,” Nishka said, pointing into the distance. She’d recognized we were close to home before anyone else.

I slowly slid my eyes up from the mountains and into the sky arching high overhead. A black speck flew slowly over the peaks. It dove in and out between the clouds, so I knew it was no bird.

“Nishka, look up there.”

“Ha! A dragon. Now I really feel like I’m home!”

“Wait, I thought that was a wyvern. What’s a dragon, then?”

“Whaddya mean? A dragon is a dragon, obviously. It’s related to wyverns. This time of year they come over the mountains like that.”

“*Kwee!*”

The word “they,” plural, startled me and I looked back up at the sky. This time I noticed countless black specks slipping through gaps in the clouds.

Oh God, a single wyvern caused all that chaos in the village, and there were *that* many dragons coming?! What do you call that, a fleet of dragons? A *murder* of dragons?

“Hey, relax.”

“How am I supposed to relax about dragons?”

“They don’t usually approach places where people live. Plus, they’re omnivores—mostly they eat plants. Aw, look, I can see the village’s look-out tower!”

“Oh, so can I.” I recognized the tip of the stone tower poking up over the woods and called out to Camulla, who was leading the party. “We’ll be at the village soon!”

At long last, we’d reached Apegut Forest. We were home.

Chapter 3:

We'll Find Happiness

JUST SEEING THE VILLAGE after all this time brought a warm, fuzzy feeling to this ol' part-timer's heart.

It must've been around May when I set out from the village, and I was away for about a month. It felt so much longer. Compared to when we left, the village trees were in full leaf. They stretched their fresh green boughs up to the sun, each jostling to get ahead of the competition. I expected summer was right around the corner. With my poncho on, the sun was strong enough to get me sweating.

The long train of settlers took in the scenery, peering at all the houses as we started heading toward the village chief's manor on foot. Nishka and I, who lived on the outskirts of the village, led the way with Camulla, the adventurer who was dispatched from Bulka and who kept our caravan organized.

Behind us came the immigrants, then the goblin laborers and the slaves pushing carts. The lone hunter and the other adventurers were positioned protectively around the group, acting as our escorts.

As soon as we reached the village proper and began making our way to the village chief's residence, the villagers set aside their farm work and began trickling in to watch us. They made a wide circle, watching and whispering to each other in low voices, but they didn't show any particular reaction outside of a vague suspicion, trading sidelong glances between themselves. The worst we got was some people rushing back to their homes.

"So much for a warm welcome," the dashing Camulla huffed, faint displeasure shadowing his otherwise gorgeous features.

"The village chief's stepson Gimul told me this village has been somewhat clannish for a long time. They don't trust outsiders," I offered.

"Then why would they invite so many to come settle here?"

The villagers would get over it with the eight families sooner or later, I was sure. The real problem would be the goblin laborers and slaves. The kid with the animal ears might be hard for them to swallow too, regardless of gender.

“I’m sure time will solve that problem. And hey, you’re a knockout. A guy like you is way too charming to have any issues.”

“Bah. Handsome! Then why am I still single, at my age? Don’t tease me about such things. But of course you wouldn’t think twice about it, since you’re still such a young buck.”

“Are you sure about that? I’m actually going to turn thirty-three this year.”

“What, really? I don’t believe that!” Camulla regarded me with incredibly stylish shock. How old did he think I was? “I was convinced you were younger than me. To think, you’re actually older!”

“I am?”

“Are you one of Nishka’s kind? One of the long-ears like her? Or maybe you have some of their blood in you?”

“Please, no, I’m completely unrelated to her brand of unwashed barbarian. But, uh, if I might ask...how old *are* you, Camulla?”

“I’m thirty-one.” He cracked a Photoshop-perfect grin. “Should I start calling you ‘big brother’?”

“No, no. That’s all right.”

The hunk and I were murmuring to each other, but with her keen hearing, Nishka must have picked up our conversation. She stuck her face between us. “Hey. Did one of ya just say something about barbarians?”

“Oh no, no, of course not. I was saying how you’re...barbed, like a rose!” Careful, Shooter. Nishka was squinting hard at me, but when I called her a rose, her face softened.

“A rose may have thorns,” Camulla added, “but it also has a gentle beauty. Such a passionate flower is the perfect way to describe someone as vivacious as you. That’s what Shooter and I were saying.” The heartthrob flashed a smile at her, gesturing dramatically.

Well, that blouse of hers might pass for a yellow rose. I think I read in a book once that yellow roses don't have a particularly good meaning in the language of flowers. Jealousy or shallow affections, if I remember right.

If you're wondering why I know something like that, it's because I gave some yellow roses to the granddaughter of my old karate teacher in Okinawa for her birthday. Guys don't pay any attention to the language of flowers, so I looked it up before giving them to her. The thing I read said they meant something like "unwavering friendship." But nope! As soon as I gave her the roses, my teacher's high school-aged granddaughter immediately looked the meaning up on her phone and damn was she angry!

A lot of dictionaries just make up their own meanings for that kinda thing, so checking beforehand hadn't helped me at all. The stupid flower shop should have warned me!

"Th-that's true, my beauty is pretty vivacious. And anyone who falls for me is gonna get some bruises!"

"And it just so happens that in the language of flowers, a yellow rose means unwavering friendship," I added, smiling. "Isn't that simply the perfect way to describe us adventurers in this village? Don't you think so, Camulla?"

"It certainly is. We should get all the adventurers together and have a drink or two."

Had Camulla observed Nishka well enough on the journey to know she'd take any excuse for a drink? Whatever the case, Camulla's intervention saved us and put Topsy Nish in a great mood.

"Anyway, we're almost to the village chief's manor. How about ya duck in there and let her know we're here, Shooter?"

"Why do I have to do it? Have one of the slaves go."

"Okay, then go, buddy," Nishka said with a snicker. "Get in there! You don't wanna get a barbarian angry, do ya?"

"Kweekwee pthhbb!"

There went my delusions of her good mood; apparently Nishka could see right

through us.

It felt like even Basil, who was tucked between her massive boobs, was taking a shot at poor Uncle Shuta. Woe is me, abandoned by my own scaly little baby!

The village chief looked down at the travelers gathered around her manor, positively dripping with her typical casually regal air.

“You’ve done well, Shooter. You didn’t manage to bring us many hunters, but I’m grateful for the adventurers that are here instead. And I ought to thank you for bringing this many settlers in the first group. Be ready to hear from me again soon.”

“Thank you so much, my lady. Thank you.” Half naked, I groveled before her.

“Now, as for you, Nishka the Scalesplitter.”

“Y-yes!”

“It came to my attention that you slipped out of the village and went to town without permission. What, exactly, did you do there?”

“I j-just wanted to get some new hunting tools, so I had to go to town to buy some.”

“Hunting tools, is it? Do you include slaves among those ‘hunting tools’? Yoi’hady tells me you bought one from her.”

“Heh...heh...um, yes. That happened too.” Nishka looked like she wanted to be anywhere else.

The village chief glanced at my belly-button piercing, frowning. We had only given her a brief overview of things with our messenger bird, but apparently Yoi had seen fit to include a thorough message of her own. “I see. Surely you were aware, Nishka, that private ownership of slaves is forbidden in this village. And surely, you wouldn’t be upset if I confiscated said slave. Unfortunately, you’ll have to find more ‘hunting tools’ elsewhere.”

“Wh-what?!” Nishka stammered.

“Thank you, your magnificence. Oh thank you, thank you!”

Nishka was scowling, but I heard her mutter, “Oh well. Fine. I only bought Shooter so I could bring him back to the village. I’m perfectly happy to have you free him.”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have any slave traders in town, but I can assume ownership by fiat. I can’t imagine what people would say if they heard a man with a new bride was enslaved by a different woman.”

Struck mute in surprise, I watched Nishka and the village chief begin to debate.

Still, even if the village chief wasn’t freeing me after all, I figured her taking charge of me meant that she would be acting kind of like a guardian. “Th-thank you, ma’am,” I said. “This means so much to me.”

“You’ve done good work, I’ll be expecting good things from you in the future, too.”

Now that I knew “Dricia” was Yoi’s auntie, I could see a slight resemblance. It was hard to point out any specific features, but they looked similar around the eyes, as well as in their plump lips. Would Yoi grow up to be like her Auntie Dricia? I shook the thought away and glanced around. Gimul had been standing to one side of the village chief, and was now engaged in a detailed conversation with Studmuffin McHollywood and the other adventurers.

“All right, Shooter. Your wife is inside with my servants, preparing some food for these settlers. Perhaps you should go say hello.”

“A-as you wish, madam.”

“Mm. Don’t get too lovey-dovey in front of everyone, now,” the village chief said with a little wink.

I stood up and bowed once more, then turned toward the manor entrance.

Gimul was busy running through the instructions for the settlers’ lodging for the night, but he spared me a glance and jerked his chin toward the manor, gesturing for me to go in.

“That belly-button piercing looks good on you,” he said.

“I never could have gotten it without you.”

“Heh. You’re about to get very busy. Better take good care of that wife of yours.”

“And I hope the settlers brought you a nice girl you can marry.”

“Hey, shut it! Although...”

I smirked at his reaction, then headed inside the village chief’s manor.

Hey there, folks. Yoshida Shuta reporting in again, thirty-two years old and just married, now recently returned from being posted long distance for work without said brand-new wife. *And* during which I hadn’t had any contact with her whatsoever. It had been weeks since we’d last seen each other, and my heart was pounding so much harder than I could’ve expected. What was I, some horny teenager? For God’s sake, at the mere sound of women’s voices fluttering out from the kitchen toward the back of the manor, I could feel my cheeks flushing!

My wife and I didn’t marry for love. We didn’t have a proper arranged marriage, either. We were married because the village chief ordered us to be. Even so, I’d fully welcomed Cassandra into my heart as my wife, and after being apart for so long, I missed her more than ever. Couldn’t help it.

How was she doing? It must’ve been hard for her not having me around to help around the house. I wondered if anything came up. Would she be happy to see me after all this time?

Thinking back to the way she looked when we set out on our journey to Bulka, I remembered watching her wave to us. That made me nostalgic. Seeing her again now, after all this time, was getting me jittery about rejection.

This mix of emotions, unleavened by any tenderness, probably left my face looking pretty unsettling. I steeled myself for any reaction Cassandra might have and then poked my head into the kitchen where I heard the women.

“Pardon me. I heard my wife might be in here?”

“Oh! Shooter!”

As soon as I came into the kitchen, my eyes met Cassandra’s. I took in her

long chestnut-colored hair and pale skin. She still wore the same frugal peasant's shift and held a cooking pot in her hands.

Cassandra's expression grew troubled and she turned her eyes away from me. Gah. She didn't want to see me after all. I knew it! I—now, hold on. It couldn't be... Sure, she looked troubled, but I spotted a slight tinge of scarlet spreading over her pale cheeks.

"Look at you, girl, standing around like a lump when we've got new villagers come from town!" An older woman who looked exactly like a pro wrestler was wielding a stick and chastising my poor wife. "They're going to be right hungry, too. There's no time for you to be lollygagging!"

It was Gintanen.

"I'm so sorry. Please excuse the interruption. I shouldn't have come in here. I really do apologize." I jumped in between Cassandra and Gintanen, but Gintanen turned on me and started beating my arm mercilessly with her stick.

"And who the heck are *you*? Is that a belly-button piercing? Where's a slave get off speaking out of turn like that? You've got some nerve!"

Brilliant tactics on her part, deliberately targeting spots with well-developed muscle, robbing me of my ability to fight back. Classic karate move.

"Ow! That hurts a lot! Stop!"

"Shut up! A slave who disobeys the people of the village needs to be taught a lesson! I'm sure you ran off from that group of settlers! Didn't you?!" Gintanen must have completely forgotten about me, zeroing in on my belly-button piercing to the exclusion of everything else. Which meant, apparently, that it was slave-beatin' time.

"Oh no, Shooter! Gintanen, please stop! This is my husband!" Cassandra hurried to my defense. Our roles as husband and wife had been reversed.

Abruptly, Gimul appeared. He must have heard all the commotion. With him were the half-naked man Dyson and the handsome-if-wildly-butch Electra—the two adventurers we hired together before he left town.

"What's going on in here?" Gimul thundered.

“Gimul, please help me! Gintanen is being mean to me!”

Gimul sighed. “The old lady’s been mean for a long, long time. Just deal with it.” He pulled Gintanen off of me and calmed everything down, then started barking out instructions. “Anyone who doesn’t have anything to do, take the pots that are done cooking outside. We’ve got just under fifty people in from town. Electra and Dyson will help take dishes out to them. Cassandra, you can go.”

“But, Gimul...”

Gintanen looked annoyed, but Gimul silenced her without a word and then continued, “You go back home with Shooter. You can take some of this food back with you.”

“A-are you sure?” asked Cassandra.

“Don’t look at me like that. Save that happiness for your husband.”

“Um, thank you so much, Gimul. Really, thank you!”

Gimul and my wife looked at each other with a strange fondness as they spoke. Their exchange wrapped up with words I suspected they had heard and spoken to each other many times.

“Anyway, I need a break from your sweaty face, Shooter; don’t you dare leave your house today. Come back here tomorrow,” Gimul said with a rare smile and a hard slap on my back. Weird. He must’ve been pretty proud of himself for saving me from Gintanen.

Cassandra and I took our steamed potatoes and left the village chief’s manor. As we were walking away, we heard Gintanen’s patience snap in an outraged shout. “Who are you callin’ an old lady?! I’ll teach you for talkin’ to people that way!”

Had the old lady really been like that for so long? Jeez. What could I wish Gimul but “good luck”?

“This cloth has a pattern that’s huge in town right now. And here’s some purple cloth, and a little red. You always dress so modestly, so, you know, I

thought it might be nice for you to have options like this!”

“All right.”

I spread the packages I had brought home over our bed, describing each item with a bright grin.

I had bought all of them for Cassandra, but I wouldn’t mind if she used some of the cloth to make me some clothes, too. “And then there’s this. I got it from my master, who was so sweet to me while I was working in town. It’s a magic lantern. It’s amazing—look! If I put some blood into it—which hurts a little, but that’s okay—and then turn it on, it’ll draw on my magic power and just burn and burn without using any oil.”

“Um. All right.”

“It’s kind of broken—it won’t react unless it’s my blood, isn’t that weird?—so she let me keep it. So as long as I’m here, we can have light at night and never need oil! We can make plans for our family late at night with the lights on...”

“Um, Shooter?”

“And I want you to have this. It’s lipstick made from safflower dye. The shopkeeper said this would be a nice shade for someone with pale skin, so I got it for you.”

“*Shooter!*”

Cassandra was always more on the reserved side. Even when I was leaving town, she looked a little uncomfortable talking with me. Now she wore an extremely displeased expression and a glowering sort of pout.

I clicked my heels and saluted. “Present, ma’am.”

“I-I still haven’t welcomed you home...”

Oh. *Oh*. I gazed intently at Cassandra’s pained expression. She looked uneasy under my scrutiny, and I could tell a riot of emotions roiled beneath the surface of her nervous moue. Was she in a bad mood? But...but why? I wasn’t going to get anywhere just wondering, though. So I turned toward Cassandra and gently wrapped both arms around her shoulders. I parted my lips. “Hey,” I whispered. “I’m home, dear wife.”

“Welcome home, Shooter.”

My pocket rocket achieved liftoff. Sweet, domesticity, the hottest fetish of 'em all.

My name is Yoshida Shuta, and at thirty-two years old I landed a smokin' hot young wife. I won the jackpot. And sure, some complicated circumstances led me to spend the first night of my marriage sleeping alone, but now, at last, my wife and I were truly a couple, body and soul.

If I had to name one problem, it would be the fact that my one-eyed monster got a little too eager and pushed the cart into the barn before the horse, lifted off with too many thrusters and burned up in the atmosphere, overhunted the great buffalo of the plains. Wink wink, nudge nudge, say no more. But I suppose stuff like that (blowing out your engine at the start of the race, dropping your cell phone in the bathtub, *you get it*) happens in long-term marriages, too, so there's even a certain charm in that.

Once we affirmed our feelings for each other, we lay entwined in our small bed. But there was still a major mood-killer in the way.

“Kweeee!”

“Sh-Shooter...?”

“Mm?”

“Don't look now, but. Um. There's a fat frilled lizard in our bed...?”

“Erk, well, we can't have that. Things got too steamy before I could tell you about my trip, so I completely forgot to get to Basil.”

Oops.

Once we got back to the village, the baby basilisk remained in the basket where he slept, and someone had brought him to our house along with my other things. The little guy slept through most of the journey, but he must have felt left out while Cassandra and I were exploring our love for each other by the light of the magic lantern. At some point, he snuck out of his basket and crawled into bed with us.

I wanted the basket to be a kind of bed for him, but Basil must have thought of me as a father; when night came, he always crawled up to cuddle wherever I was passed out. It was cute as hell, but right now it was a bit of a mood killer.

“So, um. I was about to explain, and then this all happened, but...he’s a baby basilisk. They’re a type of dragon, like wyverns.”

“He’s a type of wyvern?!” Shocked, Cassandra scooted away from him on the narrow bed.

There was no reason to look so terrified, right? But her fear was intense enough to almost get *me* scrambling away from little Basil. I scooped him up in my arms and stroked his head.

Cassandra looked at me fearfully. “Are you sure you should do that, Shooter?”

“Hm? He’s just a baby. His teeth haven’t even grown in yet, so even if he nips you, it doesn’t hurt. Besides, I was the first thing he saw after he was born. I think he might have imprinted, like how a bird fixates on the first thing it sees and recognizes that as its parent.”

“What does that mean, ‘imprint’?”

“It means that as far as Basil is concerned, I’m his guardian. Oh, I named him Basil, by the way. Basil, be nice and say hello to mommy!”

“Kwee kwee kwee!”

“Um, n-nice to meet you, Basil.”

I had alleviated some of Cassandra’s wariness, so I held Basil out to her. I thought I saw her flinch, but she took the baby in her arms and held him close.

When Nishka the Scalesplitter cuddled the little guy, I always worried he’d suffer death by her huge, delicious, smothering...force of personality, but there was no risk of that with Cassandra. She was a more modest person in just about every way.

“That’s a good boy, Basil. Now you be sure to listen to what Uncle Shuta and your mother tell you from now on. I have to go into the forest to hunt sometimes, so you’re going to protect your mother while I’m gone. Understood?”

“Kwee kwee ppthhb!”

As I reached to pat his head, Basil actually snapped his toothless beak at my fingers. The little bastard!

I didn't know how to tell whether Basil was male or female at this point, but I knew one thing for certain—he was a needy little guy. He was extremely clingy with Nishka and Yoi, too. The only exception was Mari, but she was about as good at dealing with animals as she was with people, to be honest, and I'm sure that came through loud and clear to the baby basilisk.

“Um, Shooter?”

“What is it?”

“Why do you call yourself his uncle and not his father? If I'm supposed to be his mother, that would make you his father, wouldn't it?”

“I suppose you're right. When I first started talking to him, I called myself 'uncle,' so I guess it just stuck. Also, I killed his actual parents, so it feels kind of wrong saying I'm his dad.”

I stroked the base of the baby's throat with a rueful smile. Basil looked up at me, then Cassandra, then back again with a wondering look on his face. I doubted he could understand what we were saying, but that didn't make me feel less guilty.

“Cassandra?”

“Y-yes?”

“I'm sorry I brought him here without asking. I know it's goofy, but I was just, ah, so eager to experience family life, I thought maybe it wouldn't be too soon in our marriage to have kids. But I'm sorry for springing a child on you like this.”

“N-no, it's fine. I can treat it like a rehearsal for when we really are blessed with a child.”

“That's a nice thought. Are you sure?”

“Yes. I'll do my best to raise him well.”

In the dim light, I could see the look of courage and determination on

Cassandra's face. I felt like I was slowly getting better at reading my wife's expressions.

"It's just—" I broke off.

"Just what?"

"He's going to eat kind of a lot. He's just a baby for now, so I've got it under control, but even now he eats tons of fish every day. And when he grows up, he'll be larger than this hut."

"He will...?" Cassandra's voice trailed off. "What are we going to do when he gets bigger?"

I didn't want to think about that yet, so I offered a half-hearted answer. "I'll, uh, talk to Wak'wakgoro. Maybe he can help us hunt?"

And hey, it might take fifty years or more for this dragon-kin to reach full size. In a world like this—in a town with no indoor plumbing—who could say if we'd live to see that?

Eventually the sun rose, drawing our night of bliss to an end. It was time for both of us to rise and grind.

Weirdly, after our first night together, Cassandra seemed to be walking unsteadily, as if she had stomach pains or something. I offered to lend her a hand, but she refused. "I'm all right. In fact, I'm very happy."

O...okay?

Well, whatever. I wrapped up my routine and left the hut to tend the fields before the sun fully rose, as I'd always done before leaving for Bulka.

In the time I was away from home, I thought the fields might have become overgrown, but that wasn't the case. The bean field and potato field were both stripped of weeds and the soil was decently damp. Even the cornfield looked as if someone had come through and replanted it, and I hadn't paid much attention to that one.

Weird. I expected to find the fields untended and half-neglected after Cassandra was living on her own in the hut, with only her to work them. Four

fields were a lot for one person working by herself...but then, maybe she wasn't.

Maybe Ossandra had helped. He was a smith, so he was pretty strong, and come on—it was pretty obvious he was into Cassandra. It wouldn't be so strange for him to come by and help out with our crops before heading to work at the smithy.

Ugh, that shaggy-haired fink was probably trying to score some points.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that Ossandra had given me all sorts of information about Cassandra. I knew almost nothing about her before he told me—it was his suggestion that I bring back apple cider vinegar, since she never had enough on hand. Stuff like that. Then I remembered how he asked me to let him take care of Cassandra while I was gone, and felt a little...gross.

"I'm so stupid. He must have done all this field work!" I growled. I tried to channel that anger into something productive, though, and loaded buckets of water onto the yoke. Look at me, dutifully watering the fields, looking like Ossandra's obedient little fool.

It was fine, it was *fine*. Cassandra would be happy that the fields were in such good condition, so I should be happy that she was happy.

"Hey there, Shooter. Look at you, comin' back from the city and getting' right back at it! Good on ya!"

"Ha! Wak'wakgoro! How've you been?"

I could make out the figure of Wak'wakgoro, followed by a few goblins who appeared to be some kind of underlings. I hadn't seen Wak'wakgoro since getting back. Maybe it was because Wak'wakgoro was now the leader of the hunters, but he looked all polished from his buttons to his boots. The young goblins hanging behind him were carrying yokes with water buckets on their shoulders just like me.

"What are you doing out here, Wak'wakgoro? You're not a farmer."

"Oh, you know. You were gone so long, I had to get my idiot brothers to help out with your fields."

“Hey.”

“Sup.”

“Howzit.”

Three almost identical goblins dipped their heads toward me in an offhanded greeting.

“You louts! You aren’t gonna show Shooter the proper respect and bow?”

I was afraid I might break out laughing to hear Wak’wakgoro demand that his brothers show me such respect.

“C’mon, it’s no big deal,” I said.

“Don’t worry about it. They were supposed to start apprenticing as hunters next year, maybe the year after that. But with all those hunters dying, we’re shorthanded all over the place. So I took the liberty of acceleratin’ their apprenticeship.”

“Ah, I’m sorry to report I only managed to bring one hunter back with me.”

“No helpin’ that. Not even locals want to become hunters, y’know?”

Yeah, I knew. The thought reminded me of Nishka’s obsession with the woods around Apegut Forest. She was a real outlier.

Anyway, with their brother swatting them, the three goblins bowed their heads and grudgingly apologized to me.

“So you all were the ones weeding and watering my fields while I was gone? Glad to hear it. Heh, next time I’ll bring you back a nice girl from town. City chicks love goblins.”

I was just trying to be nice, but Wak’wakgoro’s three younger brothers cried out in unison, “You mean it?!”

Wak’wakgoro gave them another light smack and a sense of relief washed over me. It was good to be home.

“By the way,” said Wak’wakgoro, a little more quietly, “have you run into Ossandra yet?”

“No, I haven’t seen him. I brought something back from the city for him, too. I

was hoping we'd run into each other."

"Ah. Hm. Well, I think you'd do better to avoid him for a little while. I guess Gimul didn't tell you yet."

"Tell me what?"

Wak'wakgoro sent his brothers out into the fields to take over for me. He fiddled with his fancy coat, stood up straighter, and edged closer to me. "While you were gone, Ossandra kept coming over to talk to Cassandra, see. I tried warning him off whenever I saw him headed here, but I didn't think that—well, no one really thought that..." Wak'wakgoro sighed. "All right, here it is: Gimul said that when he came over to deliver your letter, he found Ossandra trying to force himself on Cassandra."

"He what?!"

"I know. The village chief forbade him from being anywhere near Cassandra for a while, at the very *least*."

And I'd bought that bastard a souvenir. The fact that I spent money on him disgusted me. "That happened? He really tried to...?"

Intellectually, I knew that the guy was obsessed with her, but I was shocked to find out he actually acted on it. Sure, if there were a girl I'd been close to my whole life—someone like a little sister to me—and some total stranger showed up and took her away from me, I'd want to get her back too. But this was different. This was fucked up.

Maybe in another world, Ossandra wouldn't have twisted himself into something like this. Maybe in that world he would've been with Cassandra instead of me, would've slept with her, even. But we didn't live in that world, and...and I was glad for it.

Because I was starting to love my wife.

"Once you're done getting ready, the village chief wants to see the two of you."

The village chief had already summoned me to her manor; after working in

the fields, I dressed up to go see her. But just then, Gimul came over and informed us that my wife and I were both wanted. If this was a discussion with the chief and her retinue about how to handle my situation going forward, I guess I could understand why she wanted Cassandra to come. But it felt like something else was up.

Cassandra and I exchanged glances, then I told Gimul, “We’ll be right over.”

I couldn’t help thinking of Ossandra. Maybe the village chief wanted to make the situation clear to me in her own terms.

I asked my new wife what she thought once she was ready to go out. She flushed, coughed awkwardly, then said quietly, “That did happen, yes. But Ossandra never managed to lay a finger on me.”

“I know. I was just a little worried that—it’s so stupid, I know—maybe you really weren’t happy being with me.”

“Shooter...”

“Hm?”

Cassandra’s eyes were cast down, but she spoke with conviction. “Are you sure it’s not you who’s unhappy being married to me? I’m the only daughter of an impoverished hunter, with no family connections, and, um. I also don’t look like... like Nishka does. You know. And maybe you weren’t satisfied with what happened last night.”

I could hardly believe she was saying these things. “Don’t be ridiculous! I feel lucky to have you as my wife, Cassandra.”

“Kweee!”

“And Basil agrees—don’t ya, buddy?”

“Th-thank you for saying that. Really.”

“No, don’t thank me. Not for that. This whole time, I just kept wondering if you wouldn’t have been happier marrying Ossandra.”

Cassandra, dressed in her peasant shift with a poncho thrown over it, sat on the edge of the bed and gazed at me, blushing. “Ossandra and I are cousins,” she told me with finality. “Nothing more. He’s a good person I felt like I could

trust—or...I used to feel that way. But the village chief and the adults in a family are the ones who decide on marriages. I'm not unhappy about what happened."

"Are you sure?"

"Y-yes, I am. Sometimes I feel ashamed when you watch me do disgusting things, but..."

She was probably talking about the time I watched her using the chamber pot while we were in jail.

"C'mon. We're together. I'm gross, you're gross, everybody's gross. We can be gross together."

God, I loved her. But that just made it even harder to face her when she seemed so out of my league in so many ways. I dropped my head and told her I was sorry for bringing it up.

"—and Basil, could you quit nibbling on my fingers for one second?"

When we got to the village chief's manor, the settler families were gathered behind it, wearing clothes for field labor and holding farming tools. They were heading out to work the new fields they'd been awarded, under the direction of the village chief.

"We have chosen the sites for your fields! You'll be granted spots soon—"

I listened in while waiting for the village chief and Gimul to show up. In exchange for guaranteeing food and paying no taxes this year, the settlers were going to cultivate land on the western side of the village, which was on the other side of the river that Gintanen used to wash out her barn.

Smartly, the village was built alongside the river, which could accommodate a whole lot of growth, but they'd also had to spend many years digging irrigation canals encircling the entire settlement.

Although when I say canals, I'm more talking about man-made streams dug out by the manual labor available in this world. So, you know, narrow waterways about six feet wide.

"Do you think they called us here to help out?" asked Cassandra.

“Hmm. I’m not sure. It would make sense to ask me, but asking you to do such heavy lifting...? I dunno...”

She’d told me how she pushed herself a little too hard while I was gone and wrenched her back. I doubted that the people in the village would force her to do physical labor, knowing her present condition.

Just then, musclebound Gimul appeared behind us. “All right, you two, come with me. We have a different job for you.”

“Thank you for coming all the way out to the shack to get us, Gimul.” Standing beside me, my wife also dipped her head in a quick bow.

As we followed Gimul, out of the corner of my eye I saw some people in another group chatting with each other, holding sickles in their hands. It seemed this group was assigned to cut down weeds. They were the goblin laborers and pierced belly-button folks (that is, enslaved criminals) we brought with us from town. At the end of the sorry lot I saw one other familiar face. Through the shaggy beard, the unkempt hair, and the dirt, I recognized Ossandra.

I don’t know if she saw my surprise, but Cassandra wound her arm around mine uneasily and looked up into my face.

When Ossandra spotted us, he glared.

“What should I do in this situation?” I muttered to Gimul.

“Don’t look him in the eye if you can help it,” Gimul said. “That little font of horseshit loves to spout, and I’m sure he’s got a lot saved for you.”

We continued following Gimul and ignored the people cutting down the grass.

“Now that you two are here, we’d like to conduct a detailed survey of the area around the village to get working on that adventurer’s guild branch office.”

The handsome Camulla, alongside the adventurers who had escorted the settlers, and the two adventurers who had left Bulka with Gimul—Electra and Dyson—were all gathered with us, with Gimul standing at the center.

We were also joined by Wak’wakgoro, the new leader of the hunters who was in a damn good mood, our local wilderness expert Nishka the Scalesplitter, and

a few of the more senior hunters. That one hunter from Bulka, the one with the animal ears, was also there.

With all these people, it seemed superfluous to get us—a newbie to the village like me and someone totally untrained like Cassandra—involved.

“You said you want us to make maps,” Wak’wakgoro said to Gimul. “But if we put all the hunters on this, then not a whole lot of hunting is going to get done. What should we do about that, Gimul?”

Gimul frowned thoughtfully and returned the goblin’s gaze. “We’ll just have to make do for a bit. To start, we want a map of the roads that connect the village with the outlying settlements and the surrounding area, and we want it soon. After that, we can have the hunters step back a little if they must. I don’t suppose every single hunter goes hunting every single day, do they?”

“I suppose not. I’d appreciate you reminding the village chief not to say the hunters aren’t meeting expectations, since we’re going to be focusing on this.”

“Of course,” Gimul replied in his usual gruff tone.

At that, Camulla raised his strong-but-perfectly-moisturized hand to take over the briefing. “The people we’ve got here are hunters who are from this village, and us outsiders from the city. It’s going to be difficult for the adventurers who’ve elected to stay here to do their jobs if they don’t know the geography of the area. And someday they’re going to have to serve as a skeleton crew for the village guild.” He paused, running his fingers through his soft bangs. “I have a rough sketch here of the area around the village. I made this last night, so there’s not a lot of detail to it. We’d like you to split into groups and have a member of each party draw up a map.”

“How should we split up?”

“As far as adventurers, we’ve got two people from the village and eight people from town, for a total of ten. Maybe we should have each person from town partner up with a hunter. How many hunters are we looking at?”

“Counting me, there are only five,” said Wak’wakgoro. “There are a couple more on the outskirts of the settlement, but they’re busy hunting down some wolves at the moment.”

“Then let’s take you out of the total, Wak’wakgoro, and make parties of two adventurers and one hunter each.”

“How about you and I work together, Camulla?” Wak’wakgoro suggested. “Then we can put one party on this road, one here, and another one here.”

Representatives from each group huddled together and peered at the map Camulla had sketched.

For some reason, Cassandra, Nishka, and I weren’t asked to participate in the survey. The other person left out of the groups was the animal-eared hunter from the city. He observed the scene, his face blank. As usual, I couldn’t tell what was going through his mind.

Hnngh, he was so *cute*, even if he wasn’t a girl and I didn’t swing that way. Just, peak androgynous winsome adorableness. Frankly, maybe I didn’t care what I’d seen him pee with, because! Cuuute!

“Um, Shooter...?”

“Ack!” I coughed.

My wife stood beside me, peering up at me uncertainly.

“All right, Shooter, Cassandra—we want you to head over to the banks of the lake with Nishka and that cute little girl over there.”

Once Wak’wakgoro was finished giving assignments to the hunters and adventurers, he walked over to those of us who were left, smiling broadly. Now that Wak’wakgoro had earned the role of lead hunter, he carried himself with a lot more dignity. He used to be nothing more than a stooped older fella with a misshapen face, and I’d grown used to that guy. It was strange to see him now as a confident, formidable sort of goblin. He was like a towering giant squeezed into a considerably more petite goblin body.

“What’s wrong, Shooter?” asked Wak’wakgoro. “I can’t concentrate with you ogling me like that.”

“Forgive me.”

“All right, we’ll be going to the lakeshore, but there’s gonna be an issue.”

Wak'wakgoro straightened up, tugging on his leather vest. It sounded like he'd uncovered something serious while we were away. "Nishka, do you remember that field outside the cave where you took down the wyvern that was attacking the village?"

"Course I do, boss. I've been meanin' to say, I could draw you a map of the forest around here from memory. We don't need these people startin' from scratch. Seems like it's gonna be a lot of work to do it the way you're setting it up."

"I bet you could, but this will be a good exercise to get our new arrivals familiar with the territory. More importantly—" Wak'wakgoro's nose twitched. He sighed, then went on. "Someone turned that cave into a dungeon."

"They did *what*?"

Nishka was, of course, flabbergasted. She prided herself on knowing everything about the entirety of Apegut Forest. I'm sure she hated the idea that someone had set up a dungeon in her own backyard without her finding out. "That musta happened while we were gone."

Wak'wakgoro shook his head. "Don't think so. Seems like it's just been a really long time since anyone went in there. I don't think even wyverns have gone near the cave for the last few years. Am I wrong?"

"No, they definitely haven't. 'Cause there was a wyvern that went into that cave before and I took it out myself. And I'm sure I woulda seen some sign of the dungeon's master, or at least something of the like."

"That's how I remember it, too. I went with you to drive the wyvern off. How did it look the last time you were there?"

"When we were goin' after that enormous wyvern, Shooter and I managed to take it down before it went in...." Nishka sniffed. "Oh. Ugh. You're sayin' somethin' had already moved in and we just didn't know 'cause we stayed outside."

Nishka sunk deep into thought, a peculiar look crossing her face and her arms crossing her peculiarly gigantic bosom. I glanced over at the animal-eared hunter with the silver hair standing beside her, who was still as surly and flat as

a board. Talk about contrast.

Then I looked over at my wife, who was giving me A Look about my distractions. Ah, right. We were having a serious discussion.

“We haven’t gotten any firm reports yet, but I checked around the cave with the two adventurers Gimul brought back with him, and we found a tribe of savages had taken up residence there.”

“Savages?”

Nishka and I glanced at each other. I might have recently started teasing Nishka about being a barbarian from the steppes, but I never expected a tribe of long-eared barbarian elves like Nishka to take up residence nearby.

“Hold up, i-it’s nothin’ to do with me. My little sister’s waitin’ for me back home.”

“Who are they, then?”

“Bull-kin,” Wak’wakgoro told us bluntly. “We’re lookin’ at a clan of bull-kin.”

Bull-kin. Never heard of ’em. Maybe it meant, like, creatures with the head of a bull and the body of a human?

“When you say bull-kin, do you mean...?”

“The males are apemen with the head of a bull, and the females have horns growing out of their heads. Like Shooter, their people revere nudity. And like ogres, they absolutely never mingle with humans.”

“So they’re like the mino-whatever?” I asked, and Wak’wakgoro proceeded to give me a more thorough description.

“But yes,” he finished, “they’re sometimes called minotaurs. Do you have any where you come from, Shooter?”

“I dunno if we’ve got them, but we do know *about* them. I’ve only ever read stuff.”

“I see.”

“So are we supposed to go conquering?” I asked uncertainly.

Gimul, who had been watching this whole time in silence, opened his mouth to speak. “Right now, what our village needs is labor. We’re going to capture the clan and enslave them.”

Uh. Well, that sounded...important. And, you know, troubling. Did everybody catch that?

“But...who’s going to do that...?”

“Who else? You and Topsy. With your skills, you managed to take down a wyvern and some basilisks, after all.”

No word better described my present circumstances than “hopeless.” I could understand this task getting assigned to Nishka. She may have been a drunken rowdy lout, but she wasn’t called “Scalesplitter” for nothing. But what about me? I was an at-best rookie hunter who did side work as a fledgling adventurer; I knew how to use a shoulder yoke and take a punch but I knew jack and squat about magic or anything more useful.

And why was Cassandra in our group? She wasn’t even a hunter.

“Are you serious?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“Do I have the right to refuse this assignment?”

“No. You’re a slave, so there’s no questioning your master’s orders. You can’t refuse.”

Slave. I accidentally let my disgust show on my face.

A grin flashed across Gimul’s lips. “Come, now. Everyone knows you’re the best warrior in the village. We’ve all heard the stories of how you’ve beaten wyverns, ogres, and basilisks. Topsy over there told me everything last night.”

I spun to face Nishka. She avoided my eyes and scratched at her nose, which didn’t look as red as it must have the night before. But then her eyes flashed. She glared at Gimul. “Hold on. Did you come talk to me yesterday just so you could get the lowdown on Shooter?”

“That’s right.”

“So that’s why you gave me all that alcohol—to get me talkin’?”

“Yes.”

So last night, while Cassandra and I were working to come to terms with what “happiness” in our marriage would mean, Gimul and the others plied Nishka with drinks to get her to share stories of our adventures.

Unconsciously, I looked for some reassurance from Cassandra, but as I did, Camulla leaned in and whispered, “Actually, the village chief was the one who suggested we capture and enslave the minotaurs. I had never heard of such a thing before, so her suggestion surprised me, but apparently the previous village chief also used to capture ogres and minotaurs for forced labor.”

“Oh. Uh. Wow...”

“Minotaurs don’t live in such large family groups as ogres. I hope you can find that, at least, reassuring.”

“So which is stronger?” I asked, still feeling uncomfortable even having this conversation. “Ogres or minotaurs?”

Turning his attention away from Nishka and Gimul’s argument, Wak’wakgoro planted his hands on his hips and grinned at me. “Minotaurs are stronger. Ogres may be gigantic, but they don’t have a particularly muscular build. Minos, on the other hand, they’re strong. Real warriors. Though I suppose they’ll be no problem for you, since you managed to best Gimul with only a pole and now I hear you’ve killed basilisks. Right?”

What the yikes? Wak’wakgoro was cool with this too?

“At least tell me why we have to bring Cassandra with us. You think I’m going to be okay with something as stupid as exposing my wife to danger?”

“What are you talking about, boy? Cassandra is the daughter of a hunter. She’s an adult now, not to mention married, so she has to work. Besides, the village is short on hunters. What do you expect us to do? It’ll do her good to stick close to you and start learning the basics.” Wak’wakgoro spoke as if this was the most obvious thing in the world. “Were you listening, Cassandra?” he asked.

“Yes. I know that I said I wanted to learn a little about hunting once Shooter came back, but...joining a hunting party to capture bull-kin seems a little... much.” Cassandra clearly wasn’t agreeing to go. She looked terrified!

“Come on! We aren’t asking you to jump in with lynx and kobolds. All a woman needs to learn to hunt are rabbits and foxes. This trip is just going to be a preliminary survey of the lakeshore and the surrounding area. I’m going along. And so is that girl with the animal ears.”

At that, Cassandra and I both turned to look at the silver-haired hunter. That sweet-faced fuzzball had looked utterly detached up to this point, but now he sighed and spoke up. “May I say something?”

“And what is that, young lady?” Wak’wakgoro smiled at Fuzzball.

“Could you all *please* stop calling me a lady? You know I’m a boy, right?”

We hurried to get our hunting and adventuring gear in order, then set off to investigate the lakefront in the afternoon. The basic plan was to advance toward the lake while the sun was still up, then to approach the cave after sunset. Our only objective at this point was to get close enough to check out the situation. Capturing minotaurs could wait.

Apparently, the new adventurers were tasked with mapping the area not only to get them familiar with it, but so that when the time came to zero in on the minotaurs, we could make sure there were no viable escape routes.

“So how did you find out the minotaurs had settled on the lakeshore?” I asked Wak’wakgoro.

He gave me a collected, professional look over his shoulder. “I took Electra and Dyson out to the lake where you killed the wyvern. We found their footprints nearby.”

“Wow.”

“That whole area is usually covered in snow during the winter, so the hunters don’t often go up there. We just hunt deer in the woods or grasslands, maybe bring down any wyverns that come from the mountains looking for prey. That’s

why those footprints were so strange.”

The tracks were larger than a human’s and had clearly been there for a while, so it was doubtful they were left by any of the people who helped finish off the wyvern. When Wak’wakgoro and the others explored the area further, they spotted a minotaur.

“It was unbelievable—those minotaurs were living in spitting distance of where you and Nishka fought the wyvern. I wish they’d settled out in the grasslands. Would’ve been a lot quicker to spot them there.”

“How far back does that cave go?”

“Deep, looks like. That’s just a guess, though. We sure know a wyvern could fit into the entrance.”

“I see.”

“We found a narrower tunnel that goes deeper into the cave, but even if we were interested in searching out more wyverns, as hunters we have no business going into that cave.”

“So this is a dungeon that took hold in a natural cave?” Yoi and Mari had told me such things were one of two types of dungeons.

“You sure know your stuff, Shooter! Guess you got all kinds of adventurin’ work done in town, eh? And to think, you were barely gone a month.” Wak’wakgoro gave my ass a smack, but for once I had pants on—the humiliation was only cloth-deep.

We headed toward the hunters’ huts as we talked. Like Cassandra and I, Wak’wakgoro had to live on the outskirts of town. His house was on the way to the lake, but for some reason the pretty boy with the animal ears came with us.

“Did you say your name was Elpaco?” I asked.

“Mhm.”

Like usual, it was hard for my brain to register anything but a cute girl with animal ears when I looked at him. But Elpaco was indeed a boy, just like he’d said.

“Where did you wind up sleeping last night?”

“Until the village chief gives me hunter credentials, I don’t have a place to live. That goblin let me stay at his house.”

“You stayed in Wak’wakgoro’s hut?”

The hunter shacks were no bigger than a studio apartment, and yet Wak’wakgoro lived in one with his three younger brothers who were impossible to tell apart. And he might have more family besides that. How many people could cram into one hut?

But receiving hunter credentials and achieving independence wasn’t going to happen overnight, so Elpaco was going to have to grit his teeth and bear that living situation for a while.

“I suppose hunting families are pretty much the same everywhere. Sorry, but you’re stuck at my place for a while,” said Wak’wakgoro apologetically.

Cassandra and I clearly both felt sorry for the kid. When I glanced at her, her eyes were determined, and she nodded. Our house was no bigger than Wak’wakgoro’s, but it was about time we stopped letting other people do things for us and started helping other people instead. First step: being good neighbors.

“Ah, so, hey, bud. You’re welcome to stay with us for a while, if you want,” I said to Elpaco.

He wrinkled his nose. “You don’t think that’d be a little awkward? I know you two just got married. And you just got back from a trip to town. I dunno if you really want a third wheel hanging around.”

“Oh, ha! There’s no need to worry about us! Isn’t that right, Cassandra?”

“Y-yes, I agree. If you’d like to stay with us, we’d be happy to have you, Elpaco.”

Then again, maybe we should have spent some more time enjoying last night.

Elpaco’s face had been kind of dull and blank all day, but now I thought I saw a glimmer in his eyes as he looked between Cassandra and me. Hesitantly, he said, “Um! Are you...are you really sure I can stay with you, Shooter?”

“Of course you can!” Cassandra said.

“Our hut is about the same size as Wak’wakgoro’s, but if you don’t mind that, you’re welcome to join us.”

Goblins tended to have large families, so I figured this would save them some trouble, too. Fuzzball murmured, “Thanks...” and that was that. He would be coming to live with us.

“Sure thing. Now that you’ll be moving in, think of us as family. No need to be shy, all right?”

Fuzzball bowed politely. Cassandra and I beamed at him in return.

Now here’s the thing: I had wondered about his ears and tail during the entire trip from town, but I had refrained from asking him about them because it seemed, you know, rude. But now the kid was going to be staying in our house. This was my chance to ask whatever I could. Turned out, Elpaco was bi...uh...multiracial? The result of a union between a human and someone from a canine beastman tribe.

“Can I, um. Can I...feel your ears?” I asked.

Cassandra cried, “Sh-Shooter!”

“I’m just so curious!” I protested. “Like, do they move? What about his tail? Does it wag?”

“Shooter, I understand, but...if you’re going to ask, don’t be so forward.” That said, her face was lighting up a little too. Ha! She was just as curious as I was.

“I guess you can touch them,” Elpaco said.

“Oh! Really? Can you move them whenever you want?” I asked, petting his ears.

“That—he he—tickles!” Ohmigod this was so cute ohmigod. “And no, I can’t control them.”

“Aaah—thank you so much! I really appreciate you allowing me to do that.”

Some part of me still thought they looked so unbelievably cute they had to be fake, but they were so *warm*, aaaaahh!

“C’mon, Cassandra, you should feel them, too. Look at that! They’re real! Give

'im some skritches!"

"Um, all right. I hope you don't mind."

At her delicate touch, Elpaco let out a high-pitched "Eeee~!"

I just had the hardest time thinking of this kid as a guy, regardless of any, uh, evidence.

"Hey!" Wak'wakgoro scolded. "Stop goofing off and make sure you've got everything ready to go into the forest."

"Yes, sir. Do you think maybe Cassandra should have a weapon, too?"

"Good thinking. She needs something for self-defense, at least. A bow and arrows, or maybe a machete. Or how about a shortsword?"

"I have the mace I brought back from town. She can use that. All you've gotta do is swing it around to hurt someone, so it's perfect for a beginner. You don't need to be shredded to make use of centrifugal force."

Still, I was thinking about teaching Cassandra a little karate or weapon handling after this. I'd always secretly longed to mentor a wife or girlfriend in martial arts. Karate-Master Husband-Sensei Shooter...I liked the sound of that.

"Are you good for weapons, Elpaco?"

"Mmhm. I have my bow and a spear." He hoisted the backpack he retrieved from Wak'wakgoro's hut to prove it. An unstrung bow and quiver of arrows poked out from one side of the backpack and Elpaco was using his spear as a walking stick.

That's a relief.

We reconvened on the outskirts of the village, then set out for the lakeshore to the west of Apegut Forest.

Nishka the Scalesplitter, who knew the forest like the back of her hand, took up the lead position. Wak'wakgoro was behind her, scrupulously watching the path and the trees to make sure we didn't overlook anything on the journey. Next came me, Cassandra, and then Elpaco. Hunk Hollywood Camulla watched

our rear.

I once worked at the customer service center for a particularly sleazy mail order company that specialized in adult products. My job was pretty simple: I answered the phone calls that came in, all while sticking to the script. But the job involved single-handedly shouldering customer complaints, so it started gnawing at you after a while.

The big boss man, who was a full-time employee, would invite us out for some outdoor activities to try and let off steam. Mostly, he held barbeques.

There's no predicting what a person will get up to after they leave the Self-Defense Forces. This boss—this sex-toy slinging call center manager—who took us to barbeques at riversides and campsites was also a pro-level survivalist. He taught us how to prepare a site and set up efficiently.

Let me tell you, grilling up some tasty meat and enjoying the fruits of our labor in the great outdoors was the absolute best stress relief.

For the record, this boss had made it through Ranger training and been in a Ranger troop. I swear he could walk through the forest without making a sound. Once, when I asked him how he could do all that ninja-level stuff, he said: "If you stomp around in the woods, you'll step on a twig and make a noise, right? If you force your way through tall grass, you'll bend it and leave yet another trace. Looking at footprints is another way to see the quirks in how something walks. Once a person gets a feel for that kind of detail, Shuta, they're well on their way to learning the art of tactical espionage."

He said it so casually that I was surprised. I mean, come on—who could take tiny scraps of info and deduce all of that? But as I watched, Nishka and Wak'wakgoro sought out exactly those signs as we moved toward the lakeshore.

Elpaco had worked as a hunter outside a city, and even though he was young, he knew how to do the same thing. He might not have been at the level of the two veteran hunters leading the way, but he followed behind us without making a sound.

Cassandra was also obviously used to walking around in the forest, which made sense, given she had been born in the village. She wasn't showing any

signs of fatigue, either. Still, she was using my spear as a walking stick and apparently didn't know how to travel soundlessly or without leaving tracks.

"Do you know how to use a shortbow, Cassandra?" I asked quietly.

"My father taught me from when I was little, so I can hit rabbits and foxes. That's about it."

Honestly, it sounded like my wife was better at using a bow than me.

"But," she continued, "I don't know how to track game or set an ambush. I just know how to center on the target and pull the string..."

"That's not bad, though. I'm still learning how to be a hunter, too, so maybe we can learn more together. And...if you want to learn martial arts, I'd be happy to teach you. Then you can pay me back by teaching me how to use a bow."

"All right!"

Hell yes, Karate-Master Husband-Sensei was a go...and she could teach me too. I guess that's what married couples do, huh? Lift each other up?

As I began to fantasize about such things totally unrelated to our mission, Elpaco piped up quietly from behind us, "C-could you teach me, too?"

"You mean martial arts?" I asked, and Fuzzball nodded primly.

Well, maybe it would be more fun teaching two people instead of just one. And if they learned together, they might just foster a rivalry, which could help them keep trying hard in order not to fall behind each other.

Double hell yeah. "Sure thing."

At last, I started to recognize our surroundings. We were right around where Wak'wakgoro and I had set traps for lynxes, and also the path Nishka and I had followed to track the wyvern.

The forest opened up as we traveled, and soon enough we were almost at the lakeshore.

Nishka turned back and called, "Found 'em."

"The minotaur tracks?"

"Yup. But that ain't all. There's also a spot where it looks like someone made a

kill.”

That got a reaction from our GQ magazine adventurer. Camulla jogged to the front of the group and we followed close behind him. Wak’wakgoro studied the site of the kill then warily scanned the area. The rest of us were stuck staring at the spot Nishka had pointed out.

The earth was stained almost black with blood.

Nishka found traces on the ground that suggested something had been dragged through the area. She let her eyes follow the trail.

Camulla, who was as experienced as he was devastatingly sexy, examined the black dirt. His chainmail clinked as he shifted this way and that. “It looks a few days old.”

“Maybe it’s from a deer hunt. These tracks were made by a hoof. And these by shoes.”

I gulped when I heard Nishka mention shoes. Anyone wearing shoes could be trouble.

Rude as it sounds, ogres were more at about a Neolithic stage of development. They used metal weapons, but the ones they made themselves didn’t exactly boast fine craftsmanship. Whatever well-made weapons they had were probably traded for or stolen. More likely the latter.

As Camulla and Nishka conferred, Wak’wakgoro broke off his scout of the surrounding trees and returned to the group.

“Can you tell what kind of shoes we’re talking about?” I asked him.

“Boots. Look there. The print is very distinct,” Wak’wakgoro said, pointing.

The print was huge, maybe twelve inches long. Whoever had made it, they would have been gigantic even by pro wrestling standards. A total nightmare to meet in battle.

“It looks like there were three hunters.”

“You can tell that much from these prints?”

“Sure. Look at the wear pattern from the bottom of the shoes. See the

differences in the marks? That's how you can tell," Nishka explained, as if it were beyond obvious, and ran a finger down the bridge of her nose.

Wak'wakgoro and Camulla both nodded in agreement. Obvious to everyone but me, apparently.

"So going off the number of hunters, there's probably between seven and ten families," Wak'wakgoro mused.

"You need a comparatively large number of people to hunt deer," Camulla added, "so the fact that there are three hunters here means it's a group of forty people, at least."

My old boss could scrape together this degree of information from the barest of tracks, too.

Apparently Nishka wasn't very interested in such calculations, though. Instead, she was focused on some pebbles lying nearby. "Found an arrowhead."

Wak'wakgoro frowned. "Polished stone, I see. Similar to what we use."

"This has been worked by a blacksmith." Nishka picked the stone arrowhead up and held it out to Wak'wakgoro.

This just got worse and worse.

I once read that polished stone was obtained by striking a core stone to break off an unfinished piece, then polishing the stone flake to sharpen it. In the village, we used two kinds of stone arrowheads: a more glass-like obsidian, and polished stone like this one. Where the obsidian heads were extremely sharp, they fractured easily, so the polished stone heads were prized for their reusability.

That said, it took a fair amount of time to make a significant number of any kind of stone arrowheads, especially compared to iron ones, which were easily mass-produced. There was a limit to how many arrowheads a small tribe could manufacture, so they would more likely rely on the more reusable stone.

When Nishka handed me the stone arrowhead, I discovered something very interesting.

"Is that asphalt?"

“Huh? What’s an ass-fault?”

“This material here. It’s used to bind stones together. People get it from some components of oil that bubble up through the ground. Is there anywhere you might find crude oil around here?”

“Crewed oil? Like, with people in it?”

Nishka and Wak’wakgoro were completely thrown by my question. They cocked their heads at me curiously. More things the people in this world didn’t know about.

The people who used stone tools back in the olden days would heat up natural asphalt and use it as an adhesive to manufacture tools or repair broken pots. I first went to college because I wanted to study archaeology, and I read that tidbit in a ton of different publications.

“Is this ass-fault stuff going to be a problem for us, Shooter?” Camulla asked dubiously.

“If none of you know what crude oil or asphalt are, then these bull-kin probably didn’t originally come from anywhere around Apegut Forest,” I replied.

Incidentally, when I started talking about this stuff, Elpaco just stared at me, wide-eyed and vacant. Even Cassandra was staring, but she worked hard to keep her face serious. Were they in awe?

“Well, never mind. Let’s look around here a little more, then move closer to the cave.”

Nishka took the arrowhead back and slipped it into the field bag slung at the back of her waist. Figuring out where the bull-kin came from was secondary to worrying about their fighting power, their condition, and all that other, more obviously deadly stuff.

We investigated the lakeshore until nightfall, gathering what information we could, and we made damn sure to be cautious about it. In the worst-case scenario, we might’ve run into some of the bull-kin, who could then call for

reinforcements from their thirty or maybe fifty friends, in which case we'd be promptly trounced.

Every hunter and adventurer I knew thought these guys would be trickier to deal with than ogres, so we did *not* want to get caught unaware. We didn't want to get caught in combat at all, actually—this was recon, nothing more.

Thankfully, everything went well, and we made it to nightfall without any bull.

"Are you nervous?" I asked Cassandra over our meal of jerky and steamed potatoes.

"I...yes, I am. I've never been this deep in the forest before."

"This is my third time, and I promise it gets easier. The first time's gonna be scary, though. It's like that for everybody."

"I'm sure."

The entrance to the cave was a short distance away, yawning open on a bluff atop the hill—but I couldn't let myself see it as a cave. No, we were looking at a dungeon now. If this were an anthill, there'd be lookouts posted at the entrance, but I didn't see any here. I supposed it was still easy to mistake it for a mere cave, if you didn't know any better.

We were taking breaks in shifts, waiting for night to fall and our exploration of the cave interior to begin.

"But honestly, I'm glad you're here with me, Cassandra."

"Do you really mean that?"

"You know how useful a good meal is when you're out adventuring? None of these dorks know how to cook like you."

And even if Nishka, Wak'wakgoro, or Elpaco could whip up a meal like my wifey, they needed to focus on resting up for fighting.

We all had our specialties, come to think of it. If it did come to violence, I had my smattering of karate, but I had been completely useless at the most hunterly skill of tracking.

Prince Camulla-ing was probably more of a hunter than I was, though no one

would mistake him for a particularly stealthy type. The moment he put on his chainmail, he became too noisy to do any sneaking.

On the topic of covert operations, I asked Nishka whether it would be okay to light a fire while we were in the middle of our recon mission, since that would make it hard to keep our presence hidden.

“Should be fine. I get the sense they pretty much live in the caves and don’t ever really come out.” Nice as it was to warm myself by a fire and get some hot food in my belly, I still wasn’t so sure about the idea. Nishka just shrugged.

“Hey, even if they do come out to see what’s up, that’s just more info for us. We’ll get a better sense of how many of them there are.”

Hearing Nishka say as much did a lot to reassure me. “I just hope we don’t raise suspicion. In fact,” I joked, “if we can be *real* stealthy and keep this on the DL, we could have some fun together. I won’t tell if you won’t.”

“The Dee Ell? What? Cassandra! Shooter’s being weird again. Get your man under control.”

I guess my very twenty-first century response didn’t translate to Nishka, so now I had my wife worrying about my sanity.

Eventually, moonlight spilled across the night sky. Wak’wakgoro had been resting with his eyes shut, but now he sat back up and locked eyes with each of us.

“It’s about time we head inside the cave, I think. Me, Shooter, Miss Elpaco, and Nishka will go in. Cassandra, Camulla, will you two stay out here to cover us?”

“You sure you don’t want me to go in with you?” Cassandra asked.

“Think of it as being our backup in case something bad happens. Having strong defenders stay back is a big help.”

Camulla agreed.

“And as for you, Miss Elpaco.”

“I told you, I’m not a ‘Miss’...”

“Very sorry, young lady. If something goes wrong while we’re in there, I want

you to leave us behind and run back out to let Camulla and Cassandra know. From there, you three make sure to warn the village.”

From the way Wak’wakgoro’s nose twitched, I could tell he was skeptical that anything so dire would be necessary.

“Okay, let’s get goin’,” Nishka said. “Me and Shooter will take point.”

We heard a tiny peep of protest from behind us. It was Elpaco. “I’d feel braver if I could walk next to you, Nishka... I mean, even if I am a boy...”



Chapter 4:

Deep in the Dungeon, We Found a City

THIS WAS MY THIRD TIME entering a natural cave that had become a dungeon, the first two being our runs on that basilisk nest. I'd say the biggest difference this time was the total lack of illumination. We walked in utter darkness; it was pretty tricky.

The first part of the cave was a big open area, wide enough to fit that sleeping wyvern, but a few dozen yards beyond, the walls suddenly narrowed and the interior branched off into several small passages. No light by moon or star could penetrate these narrow corridors.

"Wouldn't it have been better to come in during the day? This place could use a little sun..." I said.

Nishka shut me down right away. "Are you stupid? At night your eyes can get used to the dark, and then you can see what's around you better."

Wak'wakgoro nodded in agreement.

Sure, I knew your eyes adjusted to the dark when you stayed there for a while...but that still didn't add up to me. Wouldn't you notice way more details at literally any time during the day? Maybe the others were so comfortable with mere starlight because they weren't human; after all, Nishka was a long-ear and Wak'wakgoro was a goblin. Or maybe it was just something they'd picked up from hunting since they were kids.

"This tunnel has been carved out pretty recently."

"You're right. The walls are still soft. And there's no discoloration."

Nishka and Fuzzball both brushed their fingers over the walls of the cave. I had seen Mari and Yoi do the same thing in the basilisk cave. I followed along now; I didn't want to miss a single piece of info if I could avoid it.

"So," Elpaco mused, "do you think the minotaurs widened the passage?"

“It’s possible. Or it could’ve been some kinda monster. Considerin’ how hard this rock is, I’m betting on the minos.”

I had always thought this kind of stonework was patented and licensed exclusively by dwarves. But now that I thought about it, minotaurs *were* renowned as the lords of labyrinths. Hell, maybe they started working on this cave in order to build one.

I could barely see where I was walking, so I fell in behind Nishka, constantly checking to make sure the ground beneath my feet was solid. Every now and then, she would touch me to give me a signal. It warmed my heart that I had gotten hold of pants to cover my lower body, but—except for my lightweight vest—my upper body was still almost entirely exposed. Which (oh no, how awful) meant that every time she did that, I was getting a little skin-to-skin contact with one Nishka the Scalesplitter.

My heart pounded against my ribs. Because, uh, the dungeon. It wasn’t the oh-so-slight chill in Nishka’s fingertips.

I kept moving forward, these ridiculous thoughts tumbling through my mind, until Nishka’s whole palm landed firmly on my abdomen. This time her touch wasn’t gentle. It suggested that she had spotted something up ahead.

“Wak’wakgoro, watch the back.”

“Right.”

“Shooter, you come with me. Stay low like I am. Girly-pup, you’re our backup.” Nishka issued these rapid-fire orders in a low voice and, ever ready for an unintentional surprise encounter, took out her machete and grabbed my hand.

Wak’wakgoro showed his veteran skill, raising a spear in one hand to guard the rear approach on full alert. Elpaco, who was pouting pretty nastily at the girly-pup snark, still obeyed Nishka and readied his shortbow. He held a reserve of arrows in the same hand as his shortbow, ready to be unleashed in a torrent at any moment. As for Nishka and I, we formed a two-man infiltration cell and pressed on down the passage.

As we advanced through the cave, it occurred to me how wrong I was,

thinking of this hideout like an anthill. It made almost no sense for a group of bull-kin to be living in such a cramped space, so...what was it, then? What was I missing?

Nishka came to an abrupt stop, lowering her head as much as she possibly could to peer farther ahead.

“Found ’em. There’s a bull-kin passed out over there,” Nishka whispered, her voice barely more audible than a breath. She quickly switched places with me and I squinted toward the other side of the cave. Just as I was about to poke my head out, Nishka shoved my head down firmly. Signal received—I stayed low.

From that vantage, I finally caught sight of a person with the head of a bull who, while not quite as tall as an ogre, was stacked with enough muscles to rival Gimul, or even that adventurer, Dyson. They were asleep, snoring faintly, and their clothes were unexpectedly fine. Nicer than anything I’d worn in this world, at the very least. Not only that, they were actually lying down in a bed with a little blanket pulled over them.

I’d pictured these bull-kin as ogre-like barbarians, but they were clearly way more advanced than that.

I drew my head back, which allowed Nishka to advance almost brazenly down the passageway. She looked back and waved at me to follow. I exchanged looks with Elpaco and signaled to Wak’wakgoro, who was even farther back, then proceeded into the hall.

I had been sure I wouldn’t be able to see anything in this darkness, but now I realized that, strangely, my eyes had started to adjust after all. I could make things out pretty well! Including that bull-headed apeman lying sound asleep, a trickle of drool hanging from his mouth.

If she’d wanted to, Nishka could have murdered the bull-kin with ease, but the village chief was expecting us to rack up laborers, not a kill count.

We crawled slowly forward a while longer, then Nishka once again held up a hand to stop me in place...against my bare stomach. I really wish she’d stop doing that. Or was it that I really wished she would never, ever stop doing that?

“I dunno what’s beyond here, but the echoes are gettin’ worse.”

“What does that mean?”

“We’re lookin’ at a big, open cave through here.”

“Like in the basilisk dungeon?” I asked, recalling the underground lake where I had protected Basil.

“Probably. I can hear people doin’ stuff. Doesn’t sound like soldiers.”

“Do you think it’s the minotaurs?”

“She’s right—I hear it, too,” whispered Elpaco.

I still couldn’t hear squat, but Nishka and Fuzzball locked eyes in understanding.

Nishka inched forward cautiously then stopped again and peered ahead. Figuring it couldn’t hurt to try, I too squinted into the darkness...and practically stumbled back in shock.

The ceiling of the cave arched—carved by tools—over an entire city. Rows of houses lined the cave, meticulously constructed from blocks of clay or stone—couldn’t tell you which—showing distinct signs of an intricate culture. Every wall in sight was adorned with vibrant, moonlit decorations.

These people were nothing like the ogres. Hell, they were more sophisticated than our own villagers. At a glance, I counted between fifty and seventy houses, at the center of which rose a much larger building.

When we’d set out, we had expected to find a few dozen people. But judging from the number of houses, the population of this settlement—no, it really was a proper *city*—was profoundly larger than that.

There were small family gardens. Light spilled through the windows of each home. The boisterous laugh of a group of bull-kin rose musically from some distant corner of the city.

“They speak the same language we do,” Nishka noted.

I nodded, remembering myself, and added, “There’s way more of them than we thought there’d be. Probably a couple hundred, at least.”

Wak’wakgoro and Elpaco both gazed out at the subterranean city, their jaws

gaping.

Even though the city was more compact than our village, it was clearly at the same level of technological advancement and cultural complexity as any aboveground settlement. Were we really going to capture some of these people and put them to work? Not only would it be hard, but...I mean...

"I've seen enough," I said. "Let's head back."

"Do you see those dogs over there? These people have dogs. We should get out of here quick," said Nishka.

"Yeah."

Elpaco's animal ears twitched deftly in response to Nishka's observation.

We retreated immediately.

We'd come looking for burly minotaurs. So, let's figure that half of the two to three hundred people in that city were males and that half of those were adults. At least fifty. Just as a guess.

Now let's look at our village: If we counted up every hunter and adventurer we had, we would barely reach twenty people. Even if we assumed the village chief and the rest of the leadership could manage a little fighting, that would just barely put us at even numbers.

This was too much.

Nishka led us quickly through the cavern.

We passed through the room where we discovered the snoozing minotaur, but apparently the bull-kin man had turned onto his other side and was now asleep facing away from us. The guard for this path into the city, probably. I stole a cautious glance at him and saw that he, too, wielded a broadsword—that weapon so popular in this world—though it was propped against a wall as he slept on the job.

Once we darted through the guardroom, Nishka's pace quickened even further.

"I had no idea the cave had turned into this! Even after my forty years, I guess there are still things I don't know about this forest," Wak'wakgoro whispered as

he walked noiselessly down the passageway. “They didn’t build a city like that overnight. Maybe they saw the wyverns weren’t comin’ to the cave anymore so they decided to link their cave up to this one.”

“Could be. But how are we going to explain this to the village chief?” I asked.

“We just gotta tell her exactly what we saw. Nishka’s no good for that, so that’ll be up to us, Shooter.”

Nishka snorted loudly and turned away, as if Wak’wakgoro had injured her pride. “Hey, I can wordicate with the best of ’em. Come on, man!”

“No, I think we better let Shooter tell her. Unlike you, he’s a learned man.”

“Hmph. He’s an illiterate reject from some buck-naked clan!”

Wow. Cool, Nishka.

“Well, since *you’re* from a tribe of steppe barbarians, what choice do we really have?”

Elpaco gasped. “You come from a barbarian tribe, Nishka?”

“That’s right,” I cooed. “Her tribe eats wyverns raw, so you better be careful not to make her angry!”

“I am not a barbarian!”

“Aww, gonna fly into one of those barbarian rages?” Yep, she was a barbarian through and through!

Once we made it out of the cave, we met up with Camulla and Cassandra.

Camulla took Wak’wakgoro aside to discuss something with him while I anxiously moved to Cassandra’s side.

“What’s the matter, Shooter?”

“We found a city of bull-kin at the other end of the cave. It’s really well built and there are a ton more people living there than we thought.”

“A...city? Not just a settlement?”

“What they’ve got going on in there is way fancier than some piddly

settlement. Some pretty ritzy houses too, way nicer than a load of village huts. In fact, how attached are you to our hut? How do you feel about having hornier neighbors?”

Cassandra pouted, looking a little miffed. “I was worried about you, you know. You shouldn’t tease me.”

“I know, I know. I’m fine. Promise.” How was she so cute even when she was irked at me? How did I land a gal like her?

(Uh...forced marriage, I guess.)

Soon, we were hurrying down the road to report our findings to the village chief as quickly as possible. I couldn’t wait to see what she decided to do. No way would she stick with that initial plan now—not when the minotaurs spoke the same language as us. We might even be able to negotiate with them and hell, even if that was off the table, the village chief would surely understand that we could *not* take these guys.

Maybe the village chief could try to assert ownership rights to the land and try to collect taxes—she could at least hold discussions to establish borders.

Even if she didn’t think of those options off the top of her head, I had to at least suggest them. The more alternatives we had to war, the better. Because even if every single person in the village went to hunt down the clan of bull-kin, there would be an intolerable number of casualties. It wouldn’t be worth it at all.

With these thoughts tumbling through my mind, the six of us hurried down the road toward the stone tower, guided by its steady lantern.

We reached the village just before dawn. When we called at the village chief’s manor, all of her servants were asleep, but it was urgent—we banged on the door to the entrance hall over and over again until the usual servant girl appeared, rubbing her eyes sleepily.

I had seen this girl any number of times now, but she always seemed a little freaked out by me. However, when she caught sight of Wak’wakgoro, gorgeous Camulla, and Nishka, something convinced her this was important.

She didn't say much, but she hurried to the back of the house to wake Gimul, and soon after the village chief herself appeared, looking like an exhausted wreck. We were led to the village chief's office, where she sat in her own personal armchair.

At first, she dismissed our report entirely.

"What? The bull-kin have built a city at the heart of the cave?"

"I don't know how they got labeled as barbarians," I said, "because they have a very advanced culture."

"Ah, I see that you haven't given up this ridiculous joke of yours, this secret civilization of amazing bull-kin. And I suppose they can fly, and shoot lasers from their eyes. Fart gold, too?"

"Unfortunately, this isn't a joke, ma'am."

"So you're telling me," she said, rubbing her eyes, "that there really is a city in that cave?"

"I don't come from this area, so I don't know exactly what qualifies as a city or a town, but they've built tons of houses that are way nicer than the thatched roofs and mud walls of our village. They've also decorated their walls with colorful designs. That sounds like a civilization to me."

"Designs, hm?"

The village chief eyed me suspiciously, but neither Wak'wakgoro nor Nishka interrupted me even once. They had seen the same things I had.

Fuzzball merely stood by, his expression completely empty and his thoughts as unreadable as ever. He didn't deny what I said, either. Gah, he was so cute, it was a bit of a shame that he wasn't a girl. W-wasn't it? I mean, it *wasn't* a shame, or no, I mean...uh, look, it was confusing.

"As you may know, culture doesn't develop unless people have surplus energy for their minds." As an almost-archeologist, I knew a decent amount about how civilizations developed. "Meaning that all these minotaurs are leading lives that afford them plenty of surplus. Their world is stable. They have leisure time. As far as we could see, even though night had fallen, their houses

were lit. We heard laughing, conversation, bull-kin socializing late into the night.”

“You’re saying they’re well-off enough that they can just...waste oil to stay up late and laugh?”

“Yes, ma’am. I realize it isn’t my place to say so, but oil is so precious for us that once the sun sets, we go to sleep not long after. Even for you, our village chief, candles and lantern oil are luxuries, correct?”

“Hmph!”

I glanced over at Wak’wakgoro and Nishka. Nishka huffed through her nose, suggesting she agreed with me.

“That’s true. And according to these two,” Wak’wakgoro continued, “the minotaurs were speaking the same language as us. Meaning that we could potentially come to an understanding with them.”

“So they even understand our language? But...hmm. If their culture is really so advanced, I suppose that only makes sense...”

“I would say at a rough estimate, there were maybe two, three hundred of them. Enough to take us on if we tried to fight.”

“Are you telling me this is your instinct as a warrior, Shooter?”

The village chief stared at me as if this were some kind of test. Her fingers toyed with the collar of her negligée, like she was...nervous. Everything I’d seen of her was the very definition of a warrior, but everyone in the room was focused on me as if I were the only real fighter on hand.

In reality, I was more of a part-time warrior—not really a warrior at all by the standards of Earth, in my humble opinion. But I used to do karate, so I was okay in one-on-one combat, I guess. And I had performed well enough with katas to win third place at a regional competition.

The village chief kept looking at me with a stony expression, so I summoned up my assessment. “Well, given the population we estimated based on the number of houses we saw, as I said, we can assume they have around three hundred people. Half of those would be men, and I’d estimate another half of

those would be men capable of fighting. That's seventy, at least. Even if we called up every single combat-capable person in this village, those seem like steep odds to me."

Every now and then, the village chief looked at me with this stern expression. She'd used it when she imprisoned me in the stone tower, too, but I didn't think the look meant anything bad. It showed a kind of trust, I thought.

You see, I used to be a manager at a convenience store. I worked part-time at one of the corporate-owned ones, to be specific, so when they built a new franchise location, they picked me to be part of the initial staff. The up-and-coming manager was a woman about the same age as me, and she had a similar air to the village chief.

Working on that initial staff was brutal. Thing was, though half the staff were battle-tested veterans with work experience, the other half were people who'd never worked in a convenience store before. When I asked the manager and the support staff of the main company why they'd hired people with no relevant experience for an opening, they all told me the same thing: "We want people who haven't been influenced by other companies' policies."

That is, they wanted people they could mold into whatever they wanted.

When the other manager put the young college or high school students through training, teaching them the basics of having a part-time job and running a convenience store, she would always stare straight into their eyes. She did this partly to make sure they didn't brush her off because she was a woman, and partly so the kids wouldn't dare to look away from her.

I don't think she was a day over twenty-five at the time, but she still taught me a lot of valuable lessons, despite the fact that I was busy goofing off doing low-paying side-jobs. Most importantly, she taught me to look someone in the eyes while talking to them.

I returned the village chief's gaze as solemnly as I could and, very suddenly, she blushed ever so slightly and glanced away.

I felt Cassandra, who was standing beside me, grab my vest. *Hard*. What? Hold on, had I done something wrong?

“Gimul! How many warriors can we muster from our territory?” the village chief asked.

“But ma’am!” I thought I’d explained why capturing and enslaving the minotaurs was impossible. Had I failed to convince her?

Her tone hardening slightly, she called to her stepson in annoyance. “Gimul. I asked you a question.”

Gimul nodded. “At the top of the list I’d put Shooter, then the five warriors living in this manor. Putting together all the people with past experience as adventurers or soldiers, and adding in all the hunters in the surrounding settlements, we might get up to about thirty people. If we include the active-duty adventurers we brought to the village, that would increase our numbers, but adventurers work on a contractual basis, so if they refuse...”

“We have less than half the forces they do, then.”

“Ma’am, you can’t seriously be considering...” Gimul was at a loss for words, staring down at his stepmother as she mulled the problem.

The village chief dismissed him and turned to Wak’wakgoro and Nishka. “Have you ever heard anything that suggests bull-kin are talented with bows?”

“They must have hunters of their own. But there ain’t many people as good as Nishka the Scalesplitter, ma’am,” Wak’wakgoro replied, choosing his words carefully.

“He he. You can rest easy on that score.” And wouldn’t you know it, Nishka just had to take the opportunity to brag.

I was increasingly afraid the village chief was actually going to go for this. Did she have some kinda secret weapon?

“Hmm...” the village chief murmured. “How can we do this...”

Finally, she looked back up at me.

I gulped, a thick knot in my throat. I was filled with trepidation, wondering what on earth she might suggest. My wife trembled beside me. Sneaking a sideways glance at her, I saw she was looking at me anxiously.

On Cassandra’s other side, Elpaco stared quietly into space, his face

unreadable. His mouth was slightly open and his animal ears twitched subtly, as if they were moving on their own.

“Shooter!” the village chief said.

“Y-yes?”

“If you were on your own, how many bull-kin would you be able to handle in a fight?”

“B-by myself? That’s hard to say. With ordinary humans, if I caught them by surprise and didn’t make *any* mistakes, I could subdue three or four. Any more than that, and all I’d be able to do is buy time with my staff.”

“I see. There’s a reason you’re the village’s best warrior!”

Yeah, your best part-time warrior, I thought to myself.

The village chief gave a curt nod and pushed herself up from her armchair. “I’ve made my decision.”

“S-so then, are we to attack? Despite what Shooter and the others have said?” Gimul put up a feeble argument, his face uncharacteristically pale for such a mountain of a man. Gimul did have a bit of an Oedipal complex, after all. He was probably terrified that something might happen to his stepmother. Plus, since our heart-to-heart in Bulka, he had started toadying up to me.

Or, wait, was he trying to take *my* side?

I was stuck in my moment of genuine shock when the village chief chuckled and looked me in the eye once again.

“Make no mistake. We fight.”

“You can’t be serious—that would be a lost cause...”

“The king himself has granted us this land in Apegut Forest. We will not yield this territory to anyone. I inherited this duty from my husband, and I will do everything in my power to protect it until I pass it on to you, Gimul.”

“But Shooter just told us we have no chance of victory in battle.”

“Do you think so little of us, son? We need not shed blood to win a battle. Diplomacy, properly deployed, is its own form of warfare.” The village chief

grinned cheerfully and smacked Gimul on his muscular back. “We’ll head for the lake as soon as day breaks. We’ll take the bull-kin by the horns and bring them to the negotiating table!”

Now it made sense: I’d read in a book once that warfare was nothing more than a tool for negotiation. Now I finally understood what that meant. I smiled—this was an approach I could admire, a strategy I could support—but it seemed that Wak’wakgoro and Nishka didn’t quite understand what was going on. Meanwhile, my wife looked as uncomfortable as ever, and meanwhile again, Elpaco’s expression was implacably neutral. They wouldn’t object, not when they actually got it.

“I have walked many battlefields as a warrior,” said the village chief, “and I see nothing to fear here, but we must be prepared in case the worst should happen. Therefore, I want you, Shooter, to stand at my side throughout the negotiations and protect me, even if it costs you your life.”

“M-me? All right.”

“If things go well, I will reward you with the greatest prize I can give.”

At the village chief’s command, I instinctively prostrated myself before her out of habit. “As you wish, madam.”

How did she *do* that? Ah, the devotion that sweet Alexandricia could draw out with her dignity!

Sure, when the wyvern attacked the village, Alexandricia had come rushing out of her manor wearing armor, sword belted at her waist. But I don’t think I could ever forget how our bold knight lost her nerve and piddled down her leg at the sight of the wyvern. The sight of the commander-in-chief cowering like that sure painted an...interesting picture of her.

The memory of this adult woman pissing her pants almost brought a grin to my face, but Gimul must’ve caught something in my eyes. He gave me a sharp look.

At the same time, his eyes begged me to keep his stepmother safe.

Bah. As if I couldn’t! I’d taken self-defense classes! Granted, that was a while ago and I only learned how to fight off pervy attackers going for *me*, but this

seemed like basically the same thing. I mean, spinning random part-time experience into actual useful stuff was basically my brand at this point, so... what was the worst that could happen?

And what was this “greatest prize” thing that sweet Alexandricia was talking about?

So anyway, there I was, completely naked. Insert record scratch—you’re probably wondering how I got here after I went and bought *all those clothes in town*. Yoi personally got me a pair of pants for Chrissake. The fates toy with me, clearly.

In less than an hour, I would get my chance to more thoroughly process how this had come to pass. There wasn’t much time to think about it now, though. Now, your hero, the bare-ass barbarian, was holding a wooden stick with a piece of white cloth tied around it, and that was the only piece of cloth in his vicinity.

They’d made this improvised white flag from my dearly beloved g-string. I know. Bite back your tears—ol’ Shooter’s going to get through this, but it gets worse.

See, the village chief had ordered me to walk out naked as a sign that we would not resist.

I gaped at her request, nakedly devastated, hard up for any counterargument. My tattered dignity dangled behind me in the wind.

I glanced over my shoulder—there stood the village chief decked out in her knight apparel, Gimul dressed for battle, with Nishka, with my wife, with all the adventurers and hunters we could scrape together arrayed in ranks as a show of force.

We stood outside the large cave on the lakeside in the western part of Apegut Forest. Several bull-kin stood across the clearing from us.

They got to be fully dressed! And those clothes looked nicer than anything I owned, anything Cassandra had ever seen, and probably anything the village chief ever wore.

This suuuuuuuuuucked.

The minotaurs were pointing at me, in all my brazen nudity, talking amongst themselves and readying their weapons.

“Wait! I’m unarmed! We’ve come to parlay with your clan!” I shouted as loudly as I could manage. Not only was I unarmed, I was totally unclothed. I would be completely exposed if they attacked.

Sure, they were minotaurs, but they couldn’t be bull-headed about negotiations, too...right?

“Hello? Konnichiwa? Can you understand me? I’m Shooter. *ShooTer*. Nice to meet you.”

My name is Yoshida Shuta. I’m a thirty-two-year-old villager, today engaged in negotiations while wearing my handsomest birthday suit.

I’d tied my beloved wife-knitted thong to a wooden pole, which I waved in the air as I drew nearer. Three bull-kin strode toward me, weapons bared. So this was the response I got for my nice, friendly greeting! What a streak of bad luck...

They surrounded me at a fair distance, just slightly farther than my own height, ensuring that I wouldn’t draw any closer. Their combat skills were just as advanced as everything else about them, then—they realized that the distance of an opponent’s height combined with the length of their weapon was the ideal range for an effective attack.

“Hey guys, there’s no need to be so suspicious. What do you have to fear from a totally naked, unarmed human?” Here I was, totally cowed, and they still weren’t listening. “We’d like to talk to you. Can we explain our situation to a representative? You can see that I’m unarmed, so—”

I planted my white flag in the ground, then turned and looked back at all the people from the village.

The village chief in her knight-wear had her longsword out in front of her, its tip dug into the ground to prop her up in a regal pose. She squinted at me and

the bull-kin. Gimul, the rest of the village leadership, the adventurers, and the hunters all lined up behind her.

“We have come to inform you of the governor’s intentions, as she rules this stretch of the forest,” I said. “We have no wish to fight you. We only want to speak with you.”

Apparently the bull-kin weren’t buying the idea that I wanted to talk with them. This may or may not have been because of all the people with all the weapons behind me. Who can say?

“What is it that you want?” one of them growled.

“I already told you. We want to talk.”

I raised both hands to show that I wasn’t going to resist, but that didn’t seem to have any effect whatsoever. They jerked their swords, which were still pointed at me, to gesture for me to sit down. I knelt.

“I’ll ask you again. What do you hope to gain from this talk?”

“You see that woman over there, the one wearing the armor? She’s the governor of this territory and a member of the knighthood: the noble Alexandricia. The governor has learned that your group of b...ah, of minotaurs has migrated into her domain, and she has come to pay you a formal visit.”

I had a hunch that the minotaurs would be offended by the term “bull-kin” that the residents of the village tossed around so casually, so I avoided saying it.

Back in the day, I used to work at an internet café frequented by some shady people. When I dealt with customers over the phone, I learned that there were a billion ways to accidentally piss someone off.

One customer I remember got infuriated when I said “thank you for your patience.” How *dare* I presume that they had already *agreed* to be patient, how *dare* I make it *sound* like the conversation was over, *whippersnapper*. They told me I should say “please give me a moment” instead, because that would mean I was *requesting* the customer’s patience. I still have no idea if that was just that one customer’s interpretation or if that’s actually something you have to pay attention to when you’re trying to be polite.

I had even less means to judge what might set these particular people off, but it felt like a sensible assumption. After all, calling them bull-kin would imply they were bulls—just beasts of burden. If a bunch of humans playing Imperialism Pretend waltzed up to my cave and said something like that to me, I know I'd be seeing red.

Oh, they'd probably think, look at these disgusting barbarians, calling us slurs again. And boom, complications and possibly a war and-slash-or stampede. A naked failure.

I cleared my throat. "Essentially, our chief would like to know when your group of minotaurs came to this territory and whether you have any plans to expand your home on the r—the range of your home. If so, there's obviously the potential for strife to break out between our peoples, and our chief would like to strike a deal before any problems arise or escalate."

"And that's all? Really?"

"Really. We'd like to speak to your representative, whether that's your governor or clan chieftain or anyone else with a similar role."

"And that person will be speaking with your governor, is that right?"

"Our chief Alexandricia and your representative, to create a level playing field—I mean, to meet as equals."

I swore to them that we weren't going to try to slip anything past them, but really, what did I know? The village chief had called this a battle without bloodshed, but she still knew how to seize the initiative. She hadn't mentioned anything to me, but she might have a secret weapon she intended to whip out when the moment was right.

"We can wait here," I said. "What will you do now?"

"Bah! You think we'll trust the word of a human? You obviously came here to intimidate us into leaving our cave. Just look at those soldiers you brought."

"You're not, wrong, exactly, but you still need to inform your superiors."

"Understand that if you attack during the discussions, we can handle ourselves."

Why was this musclebound beefman hanging back and bluffing with such a timid threat? Could it be that as their culture advanced, the bull-kin lost the bravery of the barbarian? Or maybe that lack of aggressive macho-posturing was *how* they became so cultured?

“And...and n-now we shall go to our chieftain,” he said, “who will decide whether to parlay with you. In the meantime, you’ll wait here.”

“With pleasure.”

A momentary gust of wind dissipated and rose again. My privates swayed with each swell and drop in the wind like a great oak tree, or perhaps a loose frankfurter tumbling through city streets at night.

We had agreed ahead of time that Nishka would use her wind magic to signal me if anything was up. Evidently, the village chief had reached the end of her patience—because there the signal was.

If I put a hand on my hip, it meant the negotiations were proceeding. If I crossed my arms, that meant negotiations had broken down. And if I touched my crotch, that meant to wait.

Which meant that I was forced to jiggle my jolly-place right in front of the minotaurs.

“Our chief Alexandricia is a very tolerant woman. We will be happy to await your chief’s reply. We did come here to hold discussions, after all.” As I said that, I gave the villagers behind me a chill, nonchalant kind of look, then covered my crotch with both hands.

“Uh.” A minotaur opened his mouth. He closed it. Opened it. “What...what are you doing?”

“What am I—?”

“With your penis.”

“Oh, you know. Ha! I feel kind of stupid having such a serious discussion while I’m completely naked. I figured if I covered my little guy that could make things! Less weird! Ha!” I grinned. “Ha ha! Ha. Yep.”

One of the three minotaurs slid his longsword back into its sheath and hurried

into the cave.

While we waited for the man who had run off to inform the clan chieftain, I sat on a rock near the cave entrance and got into a deeper conversation with one of the minotaurs.

I crossed my legs thoughtfully. “How many years have you all lived here?”

“Are you asking about our colony? We established our settlement here just two winters ago.”

“So this is your third year in the area?”

“Yes. You know, you have unusual features for a human from these parts. Your face is so flat, you almost look like an elf. Are you half-elven?”

The other minotaur stood in stubborn silence. He kept his sword pointed at me, obviously disgruntled.

“Sorry to disappoint, but I’m full human. I do come from a land pretty far away, though.”

“Oh, really? What’s your name? You look like you get a lot of exercise. Are you a warrior?”

“My name’s Shooter. And I guess you could call me a warrior, yeah.”

“Oh, that’s right. Shooter, you said. You use a bow, then?”

I shrugged. “What’s your name?”

I tried to be as friendly as possible to the bull-headed man seated beside me. Even if he did get to wear such fancy clothes. Lucky bastard.

The bull-kin all had animal ears like Elpaco. Every now and then, their ears would twitch in a way that highlighted how bestial they looked. Because, you know, they...had the heads of bulls. “Me?” he said. “I’m Tancelot. A soldier, obviously. So hey, we have the same job.”

“Heh. Yeah, guess so. Pleasure to meet you, Tancelot. You work sentry duty?”

“Yeah. We found footprints of someone sneaking into our town last night, so we posted lookouts just to be on the safe side. But sometimes that’s what a

soldier's got to do, am I right?"

"Aw dip, that sucks. I'm sorry to hear that!" I kinda was, actually. Those were definitely our footprints, and now poor Tancelot was stuck with extra work.

"Oh, I don't mind. Once they found those footprints, they started running us through some really tough combat drills. It was kinda fun."

"Wow. Combat drills, huh? I'd love to learn more about minotaur battle training. Getting into sparring might be fun, if we get a chance."

Oops. My interest in martial arts was showing.

"What is this 'sparring'?"

"It's like when you do fighting, but for fun. Could be with fists or weapons, doesn't matter which."

"Oh! You mean bullfighting? That can be fun, but I'm not very good at it, personally. Our chieftain is a master of fighting like that, though."

So their leader is a good bullfighter, huh? And also they called sparring "bullfighting"? That...that was pretty great, actually. Props. I grinned.

Just then, another strong breeze swelled and dropped over and over again as we relaxed on the rocks.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"The wind is acting really strange today."

My Alexandricia must have gotten annoyed and ordered Nishka to send me another signal.

"Woaaaaa! Boy howdy, sitting on a rock really hurts when you're naked," I said, trying to keep it cool and natural as I stood up and positioned myself so the village chief and her retinue could get a good, hard look at my horngus before I both-handed it. Just a bit longer. *Look at me veil the scungle for God's sake.*

"You know," I said, "how I came up to you guys stark naked to show I was unarmed and wouldn't resist? I'm glad you all understood what I was trying to convey. Aren't we all really just beautiful buck-naked creatures in this wild

world of ours? Really makes you—”

The other minotaur was not having it. “Stop fidgeting like that! Stay still!” He jabbed his blade sharply into my butt cheek and I quickly sat back down. The sex-negativity in this place, I swear.

After a little while, a long line of minotaurs marched out of the cave.

There was a particularly large oxman in their midst, and I guessed that was their leader. I wanted to believe that a group of civilized minotaur could be led by anyone, but Tancelot had told me their leader liked bullfighting, so I knew I had probably guessed right.

But no—couldn’t be. It had to be the slender man in the opulent clothes. He was more slender than the other minotaurs, but in a cut, svelte kinda way. He had the sinewy build of a martial artist.

“Our leader stands before you. Rise!”

I rolled off the boulder to my feet and was instantly surrounded by about thirty minotaurs.

“You’re the messenger the humans sent?”

“Yes. I am here on behalf of my governor, the Lady Alexandricia.”

“Oh, yes? Hrmph.”

“I am most grateful that you would deign to see me in person, chieftain. We would be most appreciative if you would allow our own chief to hold discussions with you—uugh!”

Someone knocked my legs out from under me, forcing me to fall at the minotaur chieftain’s feet. I groveled before him, totally naked.

“Hrmph. Why not? We are an open-minded people, and tolerant of our barbarian neighbors.”

“Thank you for your graciousness, lord. Thank you so much.”

The discussions went thusly:

First, the minotaur chieftain, attended by several guards, advanced into the space between the group from the village and the group of minotaurs.

I accompanied him to the spot, then waved my white flag in broad swings to signal the village chief. Then, as we had discussed at the very start, our sweet Alexandricia strode forward alone, her bearing conveying a kind of forthright honor...while Nishka stood near with her bow, ready to lay down cover fire if we needed it. If it came to it, Wak'wakgoro would join in.

The clan chieftain and village chief squared up.

"I am Knight Commander Alexandricia Jumei, who governs this region of Apegut Forest. It is right and just that you agreed to our request for parlay."

"When a barbarian chief bids me come, I come. I am Tan-Claude Van Damme, and I command this clan. You may call me Tan-Claude, if you wish."

They both extended their hands and shook.

It was like looking at a full-grown man facing off with a tweeny-bopper Disney popstar. The oxman Tan-Claude towered over the village chief, but she showed not the faintest sign of being intimidated. A smirk played at the corner of her mouth.

I was noticing a pattern, though. As Nishka would describe it, these guys all ran with the Tan clan.

"Ha ha ha!"

"What do you find so amusing, Lady Barbarian?"

"I never thought I'd see the day when a clan of minotaur would call *me* a barbarian!"

"Hrmph. You may well think so when you look at other clans, but we are different."

"Shooter has already told me. You have neighborhood upon neighborhood of lovely houses, you've decorated your walls with colorful designs—why, you seem prosperous indeed."

"Who is Shooter?" Tan-Claude cocked his horny head in confusion.

“That naked man there,” Tancelot said. He had accompanied his leader as one of the guards.

“Hrmph. You, eh? So you’re the one who snuck into our settlement yesterday.”

Startled, I looked away, finding a moment to fiddle with my junk.

“He is the greatest warrior in our village. Moreover, he has been a hunter as well as an adventurer. You could say he’s our secret weapon.”

“No matter. Hrmph. What are your demands?”

“As we said earlier, this territory belongs to me. You have apparently taken it upon yourselves to build a magnificent city within my domain. As the ruler of this land, I cannot simply overlook such a trespass.”

“And what do you intend to do about this thing you simply cannot overlook?”

“When did you build your city in this cave?”

“Three years ago. Until that time, we lived on the other side of the mountains, using ogres for labor. We were attacked by a giant wyvern, and then we stumbled across this cave and decided to take it as our new home.”

“A wyvern, eh? Our village has suffered similar attacks, as well. So you were refugees?”

“One might say so.”

I felt like I’d heard this story before. Had the wyvern that attacked our village been harassing this clan of Tans, too?

“Nevertheless, no governor can blithely pardon such an act.”

“Does your pack of barbarians plan to attack us, then?”

“That,” Alexandricia chuckled, “might be fun.”

The huge oxman who had come along with Tancelot started to reach for the sword at his hip. In response, I quickly swung my staff into a ready stance.

“Leave it, Tandalus!” the chieftain barked. “I apologize, my words were ill-chosen. I meant, what would you like to do about this? Are you telling us to leave?”

“I don’t care much for dancing around a subject, so I’ll speak plainly.”

“I would like nothing better.”

“Our rules require that anyone living within our borders must pay a tax. If the tax is paid, they are allowed to stay in our lands. Territorial leaders have a reputation to uphold. If I were to let you trespass without recompense, the governors in bordering lands would see me as weak.”

“Hrmph.”

“Naturally, I do not intend to make any unreasonable demands. One might say that we want nothing more than friendship and the opportunity to make future exchanges. And no doubt you would find it inconvenient to have the city you worked three years to build brought to shambles by a ‘pack of barbarians.’”

Alexandricia issued her demand coolly, while still giving Tan-Claude a glimpse of the situation on our end. The option of ignoring the minotaurs so long as they paid a reasonable tax was pretty clever—downright encouraging, in fact! Alexandricia would be able to keep face in front of the other governors while maintaining friendly relations with the minotaurs. Considering she had been talking war before, this was a practically mild-mannered solution.

Tan-Claude appeared to be mulling her offer. He crossed his arms and snorted “hrmph, hrmph” to himself a few times. “What fascinating terms you offer. But you are barbarians. What proof do you have that you won’t go back on your word?”

“There is a custom that has been used in such situations since ancient times,” the village chief said. “A bond of trust can be formed between two communities via marriage. We will each offer up a pledge: someone from my party and one of your relatives. We will send each to the other’s people, where they will join their new kin in marriage.”

“Are you saying that one of you will be married into my family?” Tan-Claude huffed and stroked his chin in thought.

I read a book once that said the royalty and nobility of Europe in the Middle Ages created alliances through intermarriage. Then, when the time came, they

could expect backup from their relatives by marriage during negotiations with hostile royal families. In-laws could even intercede on issues of succession, if it came to that.

This practice wasn't limited to Europe. There was a type of alliance bought with blood relatives often seen in the Warring States and Edo periods in Japan. A vassal would offer a relative up as a pledge to the monarch's family and in turn, the monarch would give the vassal one of his daughters in marriage. The reverse also happened. Two marriages, one pact. When our village chief talked about a bloodless war or using diplomacy, this must have been what she meant.

At least, if this was her final goal. Alexandricia was still a noble and a governor. She was likely engaged in these sorts of power plays every single day with none of us the wiser.

"It's not a bad suggestion, is it?" she asked.

"Perhaps. I suppose that depends on who you're offering to trade away."

"I'm sure it would be quite fun to marry you, but you wouldn't have anything to gain by marrying a decrepit old woman who's past her prime, would you? Perhaps you would find it acceptable if I turned over my stepson or a female relative? And I have plans for Shooter here, but if the woman your side sends to us has her heart set on him, that's no issue in the end. Ha ha ha!"

How could the village chief say such outrageous things so casually? And hold on, since when was I part of our Alexandricia's plans? This was news to me. Double hold on, was she suggesting I might become her husband someday? Triple hold the hell on—and if not, was she really nominating me to marry someone from the bull-kin clan?!

I was in shock. Meanwhile, the bull-kin chieftain's rough snorts indicated he had reached a decision. "That," he hrmphed, "is acceptable to me. So let us put forth our pledges now. Is Tanne d'Arc here?" Tan-Claude looked back and scanned the group of bull-kin.

"Y-yes, brother. I'm here." A woman with horns on her head stepped out from the group.

Ohhhh thank God. On a scale of bull to human, she was a bull that was as

close to being a human as she could possibly be. (I guess this brand of sexual dimorphism is one of those weird rules of fantasy worlds.) While her horns were much smaller than the bull-guys', her bazoongahoongas were bigger than the breasts of nearly anyone in our brigade of non-bulls.

Not Nishka-level, though. No one was Nishka-level.

"Um," said Tanne d'Arc, "d-do you need me for something...?"

"You will be our clan's offering as a bride. Since we must hand over one of our own as a pledge, you seem like a good candidate. You are still single, after all."

"Y-you want me to marry a barbarian? How could you be so heartless, dear brother?"

"Watch your tongue. These people might soon be your family."

"But brotherrr, look!" she whined. "These savages don't even wear clothes..."

Tanne d'Arc seemed utterly disgusted as she looked from Alexandricia to me. I was still, you know, completely naked. Not that this was going to really be a problem. Alexandricia was deeeefinitely just joking. I already had a wife, so she couldn't make me marry someone else. Could she?

I glanced over at the village chief and saw she was...chuckling? "Shooter here comes from a tribe that exalts nudity, but I promise, most of the time he does wear clothes. Don't worry."

"H-he does? Do you swear it?"

"You tell her, Shooter."

"Y-yes, I do." Very funny joke, yep, and now it was going to be over and we could move on. "But ma'am, you aren't really asking me to marry Tanne d'Arc. Because, I mean...?"

"Don't butt in."

"F-forgive me, ma'am."

"So your name is Tanne d'Arc. There's no need for such timidity, young lady. We're far from deciding whether you are to marry Shooter. If you don't care for him, you may look over the other men we have to offer and select one more to

your taste.”

“I-I can...?”

My attempt to protest had drawn the village chief’s ire, and now the little sister of the bull-kin chieftain was sizing me up like a piece of three-day fridge-meat.

But if the village chief was just going to stand there silently and watch how this played out, she had to be planning something. She smiled brightly at the bull-kin girl who had regarded me so dubiously.

“Now then,” she pivoted. “I offer my stepson as pledge. Come, Gimul!” She turned and waved for Gimul to come over.

Gimul was still back with the others, watching the scene unfold. When he saw his stepmother wave for him, he hustled up to us. “You called for me, ma’am?”

“We’ve decided that you will serve as our pledge to this bull-kin clan. You will go with them and take a wife from among the minotaurs. Congratulations on this, your most felicitous day.”

“Wh-what? I’m a pledge?”

“Yes. Why, the bull-kin chieftain has offered a pledge from his own clan. A blood relative, no less, and so we must do the same in the name of fair exchange. Those are the terms of our negotiation, so...deal with it.”

“I-I have no objections, of course...” Gimul stuttered.

He snuck a few glances at his fellow pledge Tanne d’Arc, then turned back to Alexandricia. This was Gimul, after all. The problem was his stepmom Oedipal complex, not his orders.

And so, just like that, the two pledges were decided.

“Finally, we need to affirm our agreement,” said Alexandricia. “In three days’ time we will hold a feast here by the lake to exchange our pledges and strengthen our bonds of friendship.”

“Agreed. We have some excellent cattle in our settlement. We’ll slaughter some for the festivities.”

For the first time, the village chief's face betrayed a hint of shock. "Y-you eat cattle?" she stammered, aghast.

"Hm? Even you barbarians have the know-how to slaughter cattle, do you not?"

"Of...of course we do! And we shall bring venison..."

Did bull-men eating cows count as cannibalism? Alexandricia's face kept on twitching. I knew *her* answer...

On our walk back to the village, the village chief took up position in the middle of our procession. I jogged up to her and asked, "Ma'am, you aren't seriously considering marrying me to Tan-Claude Van Damme's little sister, are you?"

"Ha ha ha! Of course not. After all, she's not interested, so we'll have to think of something else. Luckily, I have an idea."

I kept my voice low to prevent anyone else from hearing. "It's just, you know I'm already married to Cassandra."

"Then you'd be a bigamist. There's no law against that, slave or no."

"Gimul can marry the chieftain's sister. Why not do that?"

"If we did that, the happy couple would have to settle with one side or the other, and the side they didn't choose would be entirely without a hostage then, wouldn't they? Well, I suppose it doesn't matter to me one way or the other. We told them we're holding a feast three days from now."

"Are you saying that the real purpose of the feast...is to capture them?"

She blinked. "Oh dear, you think I mean to round them up and murder them like cows to the slaughter? How terrifying. You really do have the mentality of a warrior, Shooter." Alexandricia burbled with laughter, as if we were discussing some abstract idea rather than...this.

I quickly looked around to make sure that no one else was listening to our conversation. Nishka was a particular risk, since she could perk her long ears up to listen, but she was walking at the head of the line, upwind, so it looked like

we were in the clear.

“No, Shooter, we don’t need to do anything except wait for the bull-kin girl to choose someone. If she doesn’t want you, I have relatives besides Gimul. I can summon them here in the meantime.”

“Your family back home?” The ones in Bulka like Yoi, presumably.

“No, not them. When I married into this village, it was my second marriage. I have a brother-in-law through my previous husband. I’ll bring him.”

“Ah, so that’s your plan.”

“Now, as you say, there’s always the option to slaughter them all at the feast. Obviously, we would have to exhaust every other alternative before that.”

“I see.” But she’d clearly thought about it. Like it or not, it was a possibility.

A sudden memory of a book I’d read flashed through my mind. It told a story about a group of Ainu who were invited to a reconciliation feast hosted by a Japanese tribe, only for it to turn out that the tribe served the Ainu poison. If we mixed poison or some kind of drug into the food, then it wouldn’t matter how massively strong the minotaurs were. We’d trounce them. But if we did that, whatever minotaurs survived would be hostile toward us forever, mostly because of the, ah, war-crime thing. Understandable!

I remembered the manager of the convenience store I used to work at, and also the people skills training for “the next generation of managers” I got at a consulting firm. They told us over and over how the majority of work in a business was preparing thoroughly in order to set yourself up for success.

There would always be opponents, both internal and external, to any organization. But the secret to a strong business lay in ensuring that you had more allies than opponents, even if you only had a handful more allies. My manager and the trainers both constantly reiterated that eighty percent of any plan for a job was laying this groundwork. Anyone who didn’t plan like this would inevitably run into opposition or failure from an unexpected quarter.

“You understand?”

“Yes. This is the eighty percent for laying the groundwork.”

“Hm, I don’t know what that means, but you seem sure of yourself.”

“By the way, chief...”

I had neglected to ask this question earlier, so I decided to ask it now. This whispered conversation with the village chief was the perfect opportunity. I had no alternative but to ask her now.

“What is it?”

“Earlier, you said that if everything went well with this mission, you would reward me.”

“Did I?”

“And back there, you said you had plans for me. You made it sound preeetty significant...?”

The village chief chuckled. “What exactly are you hoping for?”

“I’m only, uh, wondering what my reward might be.”

I gave her my rawest, most sexually powerful head tilt. She just stuck her nose in the air and turned her face aside before walking away. I found myself hurrying to catch up.

“Making such disgusting faces is no way to act when pursuing a chief’s favor.”

The tilt had failed. Worse yet, I’d just pissed off Alexandricia!

Probably...in a charming way, though. Yeah, there we go. Girls love the tilt.

When our group returned to the village, the village chief ordered us to gather at her manor. She mainly called over the hunters, including Wak’wakgoro and Nishka. Of course, that included me and the new hunter Elpaco, whom my wife and I had agreed to let stay at our place.

“In three days’ time we’re going to hold a feast to strengthen our alliance with the bull-kin. We need to bring game that will reflect well on us at the feast. I want you all to collect an appropriate number of deer. Can you do that?” our village chief asked, settling into the armchair in her office as usual.

I had heard the entire exchange with the bull-kin chieftain, so I knew that he

and the village chief had agreed that the bull-kin would bring the cattle they took so much pride in and we would provide venison.

The bull-headed apemen offering up their cattle as food still felt a little, uh, Hannibal Lecter to me, but if we were going to offer comparable fare, meat was the only way to go.

Some people in the village did have livestock, but since the minotaurs said they'd bring beef, we couldn't also bring beef. The only thing on the same level might be pork, but as the village chief said, "I thought of using Gintanen's pigs, but with all our new settlers to feed, if we slaughter the pigs now for such little gain, we'll face food shortages."

"Ah, yeah. How many deer, do you think?" Wak'wakgoro asked, wrinkling his nose and looking up at the village chief as she tapped her finger on the arm of her chair.

"I'd like the majority of us who were there today to attend. And since some influential people will be invited, we need to get some young women to come along. So counting all those people together, we'll need enough deer to satisfy...one hundred people."

"Hmm. In that case, I'd say we should catch between five and seven deer at minimum. We can make up the remainder with chickens and pigs. We'll do as much as we can."

"Understood. Good luck."

Once the hunters had received their orders, they filed out of Alexandricia's office, Wak'wakgoro and Nishka among them. I fell in at the end of the line and was just about to leave when the village chief called to me. "Shooter, you stay here a moment."

Elpaco was right behind me, also intending to leave, but now we both stood in place.

"Leave us, beastchild. This is between me and Shooter."

"Y-yes. Of course. Elpaco, go wait outside for me."

"O-okay."

Fuzzball looked at me uncertainly, then glanced over at Alexandricia before stepping out of the room. I watched him go until I saw the door fully close, then I turned back to face the village chief.

She had obviously kept me here with no one else present so we could have a private discussion. Was this it? Was this the reward? Should I do another head tilt? I felt my crotch rising from the dead in anticipation, but I fought the feeling down and managed to avoid pitching a tent in front of the woman who literally owned me.

“Is something on your mind?” Alexandricia asked.

“Well, uh, I was wondering why you asked me to stay behind.”

“Hmph. There’s no need for concern. I was curious, you see. I’ve been told that despite looking like an adorable young woman on the outside, that beastchild claims to be a boy. How odd.”

“Yep. I was a little surprised by it myself.”

“Gimul told me about it. And that you’re letting him stay at your house now?”

“Yes. I’m helping him get his new life in order.”

“Did Cassandra have anything to say about this?”

I smiled back at Alexandricia in response. We’d agreed to it as a couple, after all.

“Hm. I’ll have you know that while the settlers have priority on the empty houses in the village, there aren’t enough to go around. If you two really want to put him up, you’ll be inconvenienced until we get new houses built.”

“If the hunters don’t look out for each other, we’ll end up with some petty disputes about housing, I’m sure.”

Since the settlers had come to us, similar issues were playing out all over the village. Settlers with families had been granted the empty houses available. But who knew what they were doing with the goblin laborers and the enslaved criminals? Maybe they’d put them into barns like they’d done with me when I first arrived. I hadn’t known about this when I was in town, but apparently if we brought back too many people, they had planned to let the settlers shack up in

the hunters' huts, too.

"I'm glad you're doing the village such a favor. I feel terrible forcing a newlywed couple to endure such an intrusion, but I hope you can be patient a while longer."

"Oh, no. It would be much harder if we had to live with some slovenly guy. I'm grateful to have taken in Elpaco. I'm sure it's easier on my wife this way, too."

"Once this business with the bull-kin is taken care of, we'll get to work on building new houses."

"Certainly."

"And once we have the scaffolding built, we can create the mud walls easily enough with earth magic. I belong to a spellcasting family, so you leave that part to me," the village chief said with a wry smile.

Oh, right—Alexandricia and Yoi were relatives, after all. Both pants-wetting spellcasters, it seemed, and I remembered someone saying Yoi was particularly skilled with earth magic.

"And one other thing. I'll need to borrow Cassandra for the banquet."

"What does that mean?"

"Remember when I said we'd need to bring young women? I'm using them as serving girls. That should placate the bull-kin and put them in a good mood."

"I see..."

"Don't give me that look, Shooter. She'll just be pouring drinks and making conversation. If anyone tries anything funny with her, that just gives us another card to play against the bull-kin chieftain."

Pants-pisser or no, our Alexandricia was a damn brilliant chief.

There was no reason to expect anything to happen, of course, and if something did, I wouldn't just sit idly by, no way. "I understand. I will do everything in my power to make sure our dealings with the bull-kin go well."

"I expect nothing less. And if everything goes well...you'll have your reward."

Okay, she *had* to be doing that on purpose.

I rejoined Elpaco outside the village chief's manor and we set out for home.

"Elpaco."

"Uh. Yes?"

"You told me that you come from a canine race of beastmen. So that means you're some kind of apeman, right? But crossed with what animal?"

Aside from humans and goblins, apparently most people in this fantasy world were beastmen and those were typically called "something-apemen." Going by that logic, he was probably a dog, tanuki, or fox-apeman. Something like that. If there even were tanuki in this world. Were there? I knew jackal-headed apemen were called kobolds, and they ranked pretty high on the furry scale. Their faces looked pretty much exactly like a jackal's. Fuzzball, though...

He sniffed. "A fox. I'm a foxling. I don't like being called an apeman..."

"Oh, s-sorry. I didn't know."

There was something about him when he pouted that just looked so adorable. I mean, in a boyish way. Platonically adorable! "I'm sure you didn't," he said.

What made him so sure about that? Was that an insult?

"Do you know where beastmen come from, Shooter?"

"Nope, no idea. I'm just a hick from somewhere really, *really* far away, so I don't know much about stuff like that. I guess there is a giant black mouse that's really famous where I come from, but that's about it."

"A giant mouse?"

"We had those there," I said, trying to divert Elpaco from asking about the world I came from.

"Really?" He looked up at me timidly, then got contemplative. "People say that dogmen were the first of all beastmen."

"I guess they do say dogs are man's best friend. I remember reading in some book that the first dogs to become domesticated split off from wolves."

“Is that true? Humans are such self-absorbed creatures. A long time ago, the ancients went through a big drop in population, so they used magic to turn female dogs into humans. It...brought their population back up. That’s really gross, right?” Fuzzball added hurriedly, obviously wanting me to back him up.

He told the story so offhandedly that it kind of stunned me. What were those ancients thinking, man? That was straight-up depraved.

“They say that we foxlings appeared a long time after that,” he said quietly. “The minotaurs were born the same way.”

“So a cow was turned into a human and the children she had became the bull-kin. Wow. Humans have done some really dark things.”

On one hand, this was fascinating stuff. On the other hand, I wanted to throw humanity in a plastic bag and throw the bag in a river. I frowned right as we reached my hut. I leaned hard against the ill-fitted door to push it open.

“Oh, welcome home, Shooter. And you too, Elpaco!”

“Hey, hon. Boy is it good to be home.”

“Th-thanks for letting me stay with you.”

“*Kwee!*”

Fuzzball, who my new wife sweetly called by his proper name, cast his eyes down to the floor, seemingly embarrassed about something. Then again, teenage boys get embarrassed about everything.

“The hot water is ready. Would you like to take a bath?”

“Sure, why not?” I replied.

“You ought to join him, Elpaco.”

“*Kwee kwee!*”

I let my chubby little frilled lizard scuttle around at my feet, and then he started rubbing against my pants. Just like Basil, trying to ruin my best pair of pants for kicks!

“So what happened on your trip today?” asked Cassandra.

“We managed to meet up with the bull-kin, and the village chief decided we

should hold a banquet three days from now.”

“Oh, my.”

“We have to go deer hunting tomorrow. And Cassandra—the village chief said that on the day of the banquet, you’ll have to serve the bull-kin drinks and chat with them,” I told her as I pulled off my vest, then reached for my pants.

Following my example, Elpaco also started to hesitantly undress. He had such a slight figure that he could have easily been mistaken for a girl. If I hadn’t been told, no way could I have known.

And then his clothes came off. Once he was undressed, Elpaco’s little nubbin was plain to see, foreskin and all. Thank goodness—after seeing him day after day, I’d started to worry what I saw on the road back from Bulka was some kinda penile hallucination.

“Now don’t be shy. You take your time and enjoy your bath. I have more water set to boil,” said Cassandra.

“Sounds good. You want me to wash your back, Elpaco?” I asked.

With Cassandra and I both encouraging him to get into the washtub, Elpaco gingerly slipped one leg into it, looking extremely flustered.

“N-no, that’s okay. I can get it myself.”

“True, you don’t want a filthy guy like me doin’ it. That wouldn’t be sexy at all. And you’re old enough to care about that stuff, ain’tcha!”

“It’s not that...”

“Would you like me to help you, then?” Seeing Elpaco’s reticence, Cassandra picked up our scrub brush and reached around Elpaco’s back.

“Wha—?”

“The water’s going to get cold if you don’t hurry up. Let’s get you washed up.”

“*Kweee! Kweee!*”

And so the job of washing Elpaco became a two-man job.

Before we finished, the chubby little frilled lizard had splashed his way into the tub. The warm water must have felt pretty good, because our little lizard

closed his eyes slightly and took a big blorping poop right in the water. This was turning out to be an...eventful bath.

“Basil!”

“Kwee...”

Chapter 5:

She's a Mino-ckout

HHEY FOLKS, still Shooter, still thirty-two, and still a villager in a strange new world. I was supposed to be a hunter in my little frontier village, but I hadn't been doing very hunterly stuff lately. Not until today—today, a force of ten hunters and adventurers were pursuing a herd of deer through the forest, and I was with them. Turned out I'd really missed holding my hunting shortbow and spear, not to mention actually participating in a hunt.

As of a few days ago, an unused storehouse had been converted into a new adventurer's guild for the village, and that guild had given us a large map to update with our teams' information. The map was the product of the combined efforts of the hunter and adventurer teams charting the expanse of forest and fields surrounding our village. We were to mark the location of any animals with pins as well as record any other new intel. It was a thoroughly analog way of doing things compared to the world I used to live in, but it worked well enough. We started using it as soon as it was up on the wall.

"I saw them over there. A small herd, maybe fifty or sixty head. It might be an offshoot of the herd our tip mentioned," an adventurer who was new to the village reported. His voice was low, but still carried well to the rest of our group.

Nishka and Wak'wakgoro were on the front line of the hunting party, and they moved through the thick woods like silent swimmers in water.

They weren't going to target the herd itself. Rather, they would circle around in back of it. The rest of us, meanwhile, would sneak closer to the herd from the front. All of these roles were determined ahead of time.

We readied our spears and bows, though Nishka still didn't have her bow out.

Wak'wakgoro issued orders to the hunting dogs he had inherited from the previous leader of the hunters, the late Saki'cho. Half of the dogs broke from Wak'wakgoro and moved to precede us in our approach.

And in among the hunting dogs toddled my roly-poly frilled lizard, chubby

little Basil. I had my doubts that we would ever be able to feed him enough on our own, so I thought it would be a good idea for Wak'wakgoro to train Basil alongside the hunting dogs. But now here Wak'wakgoro was, ordering my baby into battle!

Basil mostly did what he was told, so Wak'wakgoro wasn't having any problems with him. We were using the proper technique for training hunting dogs, too, letting Basil get used to the hunt while he was still young.

Then again, it was pushing it a little to call Basil merely "young"—he was still a baby! Nevertheless, he seemed to be getting it. Shrill cries of *kwee!* were usually his trademark, but he'd figured out the need for silence while we were on the hunt. When he grew up, he might end up better than any hunting dog.

"When are we supposed to strike?" I asked the young hunter beside me.

"I dunno. I can't see Wak'wakgoro or Nishka anymore. They'll probably signal us with a whistle, so we can jump out and start driving the deer."

Cassandra and Elpaco hung back close behind us and we advanced together, sweeping the brush aside. We kept low to the ground, one and all.

I wasn't very good with a bow, but our plan was for everyone to fire their arrows all at once when signaled. Hunters who were skilled archers could go on to a second and third strike, but the rest of us would take advantage of the cover fire to leap out with spears in hand.

Camulla, Folgo—one of those adventurers I had brought back from town—and I would take charge of the spear shenanigans. Camulla seemed like he would be pretty skilled with a bow, that Legolas-lookin' stud, but Folgo and I would have been the only two runners if he joined the second-wave so he elected to bolster our ranks instead.

Thick sweat coated my brow. Summer was here at last; hunched in the thick underbrush with Folgo and Camulla, the humidity was something else. The deer munched on the grass as they trotted along. Every now and then, one would lift its head and scan its surroundings.

We were following traditional hunting procedures, starting downwind and moving up toward the west, so none of the deer had noticed our presence yet.

Even the hunting dogs were creeping slowly through the forest, hunkered down low. I was suddenly reminded of going hunting with my uncle and his friends.

Watching Basil mimicking their dogs' hunting stance with his rotund little body, I had to smile. The difference was, Basil wasn't remotely tense. He looked like he thought this was just a natural extension of the games he played. The little copycat devil.

Meanwhile, there was Nishka, skillfully moving upwind. Wak'wakgoro was a veteran hunter himself, but he lacked Nishka's sheer mobility. He'd fallen a little behind her, though we didn't know the details till later—unable to move from our vantage point, we quickly lost sight of them both.

Thinking back, that was the first time I ever participated in a large-scale hunt, except for the time we hunted the wyvern. And our luck was good that day. We'd found our prey relatively easily.

As the scent of mud and thick vegetation curled in my nose, I drew an arrow from my quiver. Some intangible sense came over me, something about the group's behavior—it was almost time to attack. The young man next to me held three arrows in one hand, I guess so he could lay down fire quick.

An arrow whistled through the air.

Through the gaps in the underbrush, we saw all the deer raise their heads, just as we anticipated. *What was that?* they seemed to ask.

At that moment, the hunting dogs leapt from the underbrush, baying loudly.

"Fire!" the young hunter shouted, and every one of us released our arrows.

I let loose my arrow, as did Cassandra and Elpaco. Unfortunately, Cassandra hadn't drawn her bow far enough, so her arrow fell somewhat short of the herd. Elpaco's arrow went the full distance, but he missed.

They each quickly nocked a second arrow, while I ran out into the field with Basil and the hunting dogs.

As I ran forward, I saw that two of the deer had been struck squarely by arrows. One buck had been one-shotted—by Nishka's longbow, I was sure—and it lurched forward before it fell. The other we probably owed to Wak'wakgoro

or one of the other veteran hunters. Several arrows were lodged in its haunches, so I guess everyone had aimed for the easiest spot to hit.

And then, in the middle of the chaos, Basil did something wild.

GRROOOOHH!!

How could such a huge bellow come out of such a teensy body? I recognized it, though. It was that thunderous paralyzing roar, the greatest weapon of a true basilisk. Naturally, I started to stumble...and fell down, took a hold of myself, rolled into a defensive posture, and hopped back to my feet.

Goofy little dork, he needed to tell us in the strategy meeting if he was gonna do that! I was able to keep my feet and continue running, but Camulla and Folgo covered their ears and cowered.

Basil's howl threw the fleeing deer into chaos, as well. Some reared up on their hind legs, others tumbled to the ground where they stood, and still others stood on all fours, frozen in place.

He'd hooked every single one!

I dashed toward the herd, targeting a deer that had conveniently fallen to the ground. Aiming for its vitals, I stabbed my spear into its abdomen. I immediately pulled my spear back out and started looking for my next target, but the deer I had struck was still kicking, trying to stand up. I quickly drew my knife and thrust it into the deer's throat. That would do it, right?

At which point my allies' arrows cascaded down on my position. I panicked.

"Stop! You're going to hit me! Stop firing, *stop!*"

One deer managed to get to its feet and was starting to bolt at full speed when an arrow from one of the heavy bows whizzed right past my eye before lodging firmly in the deer's vitals. I just about pissed my pants.

"Christ, Nishka, you're gonna give me a heart attack!"

Thanks to Basil's roar petrifying the herd and Nishka's heavy bow, we managed to bag the seven deer we had promised with ease. I was almost disappointed with how smoothly it went, but I still felt numb. I'd watched a hail of arrows fly down around me, and Nishka had (probably deliberately) fired one

right past my face.

Nishka the Scalesplitter stepped out from the brush as if daring me to say something. I glared at her. She scrubbed her hair and boasted, “Ugh. That was way too easy. We should go hunting wyverns again.”

“Not a chance!”

Three days later, we held the feast on the lakeshore.

People from both sides pitched simple tents around the area and began preparations the night before. As morning came, the food stock came streaming in and the cooks in both groups got down to work.

We in the village prepared some dishes using liver and wine-pickled venison, and we loaded the meat into stockpots to transport it to the feast. As for the bull-kin, they slaughtered some cattle and planned to barbeque the meat. It wasn't American-style barbeque, though. If anything, it was more like what you would see in some kinda “monster hunting” game, where the meat was skewered on an iron stick and roasted over an open flame.

At least the cooking went smoothly. Gintanen directed women from the village to ladle venison soup and pickled organs into wooden dishes, and they began to hand the dishes out to the leading dignitaries of both groups.

A slightly more luxurious tent was set up for the village chief and the bull-kin chieftain, along with Gimul, Tanne d’Arc, and me for some reason. It felt strange.

“This beef is delicious. You said your city is a colony? Do you get to eat such wonderful food all the time?”

“Hrmph. Certainly not. We slaughter a few of our cattle for celebrations such as this, though almost never so many at once. Ordinarily, we only take what we need and distribute small amounts throughout the settlement.”

“Well, if you ever have the chance, I would be most grateful if you could loan us a stud bull.”

“I’m impressed by how much venison your village was able to collect on such

short notice. Hrmph. The flavor is outstanding. I suppose it's only to be expected that a tribe of barbarians would be mighty hunters."

"Ha ha ha! You said it, bullhead!"

I took a sip of the wine, which was as disgusting as always, and chewed on the dry, tasteless venison we had been served.

Not to be rude, but I've eaten wagyu before, and after experiencing such exquisite meat, I didn't find the beef that the minotaurs were so proud of to be very good at all. The taste was the only thing remotely American about this barbeque.

Not that I'm down on the seasoning in this fantasy world. In fact, when I think back on it now, the lean beef they were serving had a pretty good texture and wasn't actually that bad once you got used to it.

The wine was still disgusting, though. Sure, it was always disgusting, but even the better food tasted awful with the musical accompaniment of powerful people bargaining away our lives.

I set my wine glass on my dining tray with a sigh, then glanced over at Gimul. He was about to be offered up as a pledge and sent away from the village for as good as forever, so I doubted he was in a very good mood. But as usual, his face betrayed nothing.

"Are you going to drink, Gimul?"

"Shut up."

"If we don't talk, this won't be much of a party. You're still not ready to go through with this, are you?"

"Go be social with the bull-kin. Leave me alone."

"Look, Gimul..." I shouldn't have done this, but the alcohol had eroded my inhibitions. I edged closer to him and whispered, "It's not your fault things turned out this way. You should think about what the best possible outcome would be in this situation and work toward that. When you're backed into a corner, that's when you get most creative."

"Easy for you to say. You're getting a beautiful bride from the bull-kin. And

she's the little sister of the chieftain, so she's part of a powerful family. But me? I'm being sent off as a pledge, and to who? I have no idea. I can only imagine what they're saying about me back in the village." His face dark with bitterness, Gimul drained his cup of wine.

Just then, I remembered that Gimul didn't handle his alcohol well. When we first met, he had drawn his sword on me in order to steal my wine. He'd been pretty well-behaved when we went to town, but maybe that was because we were traveling and he needed to watch out for himself.

Now, Gimul poured more wine for himself and chugged down cup after cup. "Please," he muttered, "watch out for the village chief—take care of my stepmother for me. If one of the bull-kin marries her, I'll lose my mind."

"You can't do that. Your stepmother has gone to all this trouble to set you up for the future. You need to accept your mother's wishes for you."

Gimul slammed down his cup. "I wish I was the one always getting new wives!"

"No one's decided that the girl is going to marry me yet. The village chief might be looking for someone else for her."

"What are you saying, hm? Are you—are you saying you don't appreciate what my stepmother is doing for you? Everything she's done?"

"No, of course not."

He always got this way when he was drunk. Such a pain in the neck.

"I hope they give me someone beautiful, too..." he mumbled.

So that was what this was all about. No one had spoken to Gimul about who he was going to marry, so he was imagining all sorts of terrible scenarios. And of course he was upset about having to leave his mother.

"Listen," Gimul slurred, "if my stepmother ever talks about getting remarried, you need to do everything in your power to put a stop to it. If I have to hand her over to someone else, I want it to be you I'm calling 'father.'"

"Excuse me?" I shrieked, nearly hysterical at what Gimul was saying to me.

"Look, if the marriage was just symbolic, and you and my stepmother got

married, no one would dare make a play for her then. See what I did there? Ideas. I'm fulla ideas. You appreciate that now, okay? You're gonna do this for me, Shooter."

"You're pretty drunk, aren't you?"

"Pshhhh. Nah. I'm the same as I always am. You're drunk," he said, drunkenly. Gimul continued to outline his so-called "great idea" to me. I glanced over to Tanne d'Arc, who was seated on my other side and, almost immediately, a woman from our village came by and offered the bull-kin girl more of the terrible wine. I thought maybe it would be Cassandra, but it turned out to be Gintanen, of all people.

I expected Gintanen's usual sour expression, but she was wearing this awful fake smile. Brr. The village chief had said she would gather young, pretty women to entertain the guests. I guess Gintanen fit...one of those words?

As if reading my mind, Tanne d'Arc turned down Gintanen's offer of wine. Gintanen's smile instantly melted into a glower, so I quickly intervened.

"Thank you, Gintanen. A lovely woman like you shouldn't waste your time here. Go see if any of those handsome young men need anything. I'll chat with our little Tanne d'Arc. I *am* the best warrior in the village, after all."

"Harrumph. The best naked slave in the village—that I would believe!"

I managed to avert disaster, but now the problem was Tanne d'Arc. She kept her face passively demure, but there was a steel in the set of her jaw. I scanned her expression intently. How could I patch this up?



“I’m not sure I like the way you’re looking at me,” she said. “Is there something on my face? And don’t think I didn’t notice the way you were ogling my breasts earlier. Like some sort of beastly ogre.”

“Well, it’s human nature for the eyes to be drawn to the great wonders of the world.”

She sniffed. “You really are barbarians, then.”

“Certainly not! I’m an admirer of the human form, like any man of culture.” I refused to let her label me a barbarian because, I mean, that was Nishka, right? “Speaking of, are you really so opposed to marrying a human?”

“Of course I am. After all, I heard that you already have a wife! Oh yes, Sir Barbarian, what an honor, to be an auxiliary wife. How charming.”

“No, that’s not—I just married my wife this spring, and I am grateful to have her in my life.”

“Well, I’m glad *someone* is feeling grateful in all this mess.”

“I suppose that’s fair.”

“Ha! Do you, now? Well then, what are you going to do about it?”

“The fact is, this puts me in an uncomfortable position, too. I can’t go against the wishes of the village chief and I have no idea how I would persuade my wife to accept the situation. Why don’t you just tell them you don’t want to be with me?”

If Tanne d’Arc reacted with utter disdain and refused me, then the candidacy would automatically move to someone else. Even if no one in Alexandricia’s family was eligible, what about that studmuffin Camulla? His lifestyle offered a lot of freedom, and anybody would be lucky to end up with such a drop-dead hunk.

“And you think I can go against my brother’s wishes? Or are you offering to convince him to choose someone else?”

“Oh, no. I heard he’s a professional bullfighter. I don’t think I’d like to make him angry.”

“Well, then what are we supposed to do?! Hrmph.” Glowering, Tanne d’Arc grabbed her wine cup and drained it in one gulp. She let out a delicate sigh followed by a less delicate belch, and quickly covered her mouth with one hand.

Well. That was one way to drink.

“Just so you know,” I said cautiously, “the wine isn’t very strong, but you should go it a little slower. Are you feeling all right?”

“Mind your own business. Are you not going to serve me? I thought you said that you would replace that serving woman, since you’re the best naked slave in your whole wide village. Was that just empty posturing?”

Well, wasn’t she a smart aleck? A very cute smart aleck, admittedly. Which! Relatable. She was still young enough to get away with being sarcastic without driving everybody insane. Isn’t that right, Gintanen?

Tanne d’Arc kept one hand over her mouth and thrust her wine cup toward me with the other, so I poured her another serving.

“To tell you the truth,” I admitted, “I haven’t actually told my wife that the village chief might be giving me a new bride.”

“So what? I’ve heard that it’s completely normal for barbarians to have multiple wives waiting on them hand and foot. Is that not true?”

“Well, as you can see, I’m a slave,” I explained, tugging on my belly-button piercing to show it to her. “We may be barbarians, but I’m in the lowest caste of the village.”

“If you’re their best warrior, how in the world did you wind up becoming a slave?”

“It’s a long, long story.”

“Oh, say no more,” she snapped. “I bet that brutish village chief of yours made you a slave so she could put a leash on you. And she wants children who’ll be strong warriors one day, so she’s making me marry you to bear your children.”

Uhh. I...didn’t know how to respond to that.

Lost in her thoughts, Tanne d’Arc let out a deep sigh—a ridiculously deep sigh

that somehow managed to make her boobs bounce. No, I don't get it either. You get used to these things in a fantasy world. "I had plans, you know. My dream was to choose who I fell in love with and wed a dashing white bull-knight. I'm devastated that my brother would make me marry some buck-naked barbarian warrior like you. A strategic marriage in this day and age? You truly are a lot of savages, aren't you?"

"Look, quit calling us barbarians and savages and whatever else. You're being rude."

She hiccupped. "And what are you going to do about it, you stupid, bare-ass, slave-worm backwater—"

I finally, *finally* lost my cool and swatted Tanne d'Arc's horn with my palm.

She was aghast. So was I, honestly. "Um. I...are you okay? Did that hurt?"

"Did you...just...touch...my horns?"

"Uh, I guess I might have."

"You said marrying me would put you in an awkward position, and then you have the nerve to offer me your hand? You really are a barbarian!"

"Hey...look, I didn't even hit you that hard. I don't even think I've hit anybody before outside of like, actual combat. And why are you mad if you think I'm just offering you a hand?"

What was I missing here?

For another second Tanne d'Arc stood frozen in alarm, trembling. Then she started screaming for her brother. "Tan-Claude! *Tan-Claude!*"

And wouldn't you know it—the representatives of the two groups looked up from whatever extensive diplomatic talks they were conducting and came over to us.

"What is it, Tanne d'Arc? Aren't you getting along with our new bond-brother?"

"What happened, Shooter?"

“Look! Here! That man...that savage obsessed with nudity...he...he touched my horn with his bare hand...”

“He did? You self-absorbed little snout! How dare you propose to my sister already? What do you take her for, huh?”

I had no idea what I took her for, except for pretty dang rude. But now Tanne d’Arc was shrieking so loudly that bull-kin and village leadership alike were streaming over from other tents to peer into ours.

And, oh no—what if Cassandra saw all of this and...whatever it was? I quickly scanned the room. I spotted her standing with Nishka, peeking into the tent. I gave Nishka a pained, begging sort of look. Help? Somehow?

“What did you do to her, Shooter?” Alexandricia hissed.

“I didn’t do anything!” I hurried to explain. “Mostly!”

“Excuse me, but my sister claims this warrior of yours has asked to marry her. In our clan, the only man allowed to touch a woman’s horns is her future husband. You must have some kind of death wish, pulling that in front of me!”

The village chief nodded. “I see. So you’ve made up your mind, Shooter? Then I congratulate you. Now that you have two wives, we’ll build you a new house as a reward. I had been considering it anyway, but we ought to hurry it along now.”

But she—but I—! Oh, the village chief knew *exactly* what was going on, I could see it on her face! But here she was, just standing there and using everyone else’s confusion as cover! And, what? My reward was a new house? After all the build-up she laid down! Brilliant. Monstrous.

My inner monologue went on and on, but I didn’t voice any of it. I didn’t have time. Because the moment Cassandra looked at me, deflated, I just fell speechless.

“You should have told me sooner if you were planning to do that, Shooter. It’s going to impact our living expenses, after all.” Those were the first words my wife spoke, almost before I noticed her and Nishka drawing near.

More than half of the bull-kin had chased after Tanne d'Arc once she stormed from the tent. I was the last one still hanging there.

"Hold on a second. This is a complete misunderstanding."

"There's no misunderstanding," Cassandra huffed, "I promise you. It's just that we're poor, and now we'll have to make our home bigger. We already have Basil and Elpaco, after all," Cassandra began to count each point off on her fingers. Finally, she turned her trademark look of discontent on me. "The village chief or adult relatives decide who marries whom. You know I understand that."

"R-right." I shrank under her gaze.

"But I *am* angry. I have the right to be angry here, don't you think? I'm hurt. I thought we belonged to each other, nobody else." Cassandra abruptly turned away and rose to her feet, then walked out of the tent.

As a fellow man, I hoped that Gimul might help me out, but he was too drunk. He was totally trashed, crumpled to one side like the leaning tower of Pisa and starting to doze.

I guess at a time like this, you couldn't rely on anyone but yourself.

Once, a long time ago, I had a real easy job. All I had to do was brainstorm plan proposals for a company. The company gathered people from all kinds of different part-time jobs in one conference room and had us wrack our brains from dawn 'til dusk. Our manager hounded us endlessly and squeezed ideas out of us while making tons of crazy demands. "We don't have a budget this time," he'd say. "Is there any way we can still get this product out there?"

If anyone told him "Of course not!" he would tell them they weren't fit for the job and then he'd just push the rest of us even harder. Coming up with new ideas while being hounded by our manager was tough, but there was also a sense of satisfaction when we got the job done.

So in the spirit of chasing that sense of satisfaction, I had to figure a way out of this current crisis.

My wife was angry. It was my fault. She said she wanted to keep me to herself, and now she couldn't. I loved my wife, but we both knew our Alexandricia's word was law. I was in precarious circumstances, and I had to

figure out how to fix it on my own. Somehow.

“Hey, Shooter. You seriously gonna marry that oxgirl with the rockin’ udders?” Nishka asked.

“I don’t know, but it looks like the village chief wants me to.”

“Oh, boo hoo. You want her to tuck you in, too? Sounds like this is your problem to solve, not hers.”

“I didn’t even mean to! I just kinda...accidentally proposed to the girl with some kind of bull-kin custom. If they’re really that mad, I’m sure the village chief will find someone else to marry her, but I think she intended me to be the candidate since the very beginning.”

“Oh, yeah? Then I guess that’s destiny for ya. No use tryin’ to get out of it.”

“But where I come from, the law says you can only be married to one person at a time.”

“Does this look like where you’re from?”

“No, but...” I sighed. With nothing but the sound of Gimul’s snoring in the background, I guzzled down the terrible wine. “I know how this is gonna pan out, and I know I can’t do anything to change it. All I can do is talk it over with Cassandra and figure out what kind of relationship we can have with Tanne d’Arc. But Cassandra is the wife I had first. I need to respect that.”

“Look at you, figuring it alllll out in a flash. Good on you, dude.” Nishka took a pull straight from the wine bottle. “Whew, that’s tasty!”

That was so like her. Damn it, this world could be so cruel, and so quickly.

I’d been acting like a spoiled child and I suppose the gods of this world had wanted to exact their vengeance on me.

When Alexandricia and Tan-Claude Van Damme returned to the tent, they strode right up to me with, for some reason, Cassandra and Tanne d’Arc trailing in behind them. Tanne d’Arc was fidgeting, clearly embarrassed, and I couldn’t fathom why Cassandra was comforting her. I mean, they were barely gone for a second!

“We’ve discussed the issue, and Tan-Claude’s sister has said that if you prove that you’re really the strongest warrior in the village, then she will submit to marrying you.”

“But how do I prove whether I’m the strongest?” My face was a mask of confusion. This situation was just too much to swallow.

The bull-kin chieftain flashed a grin at me. His teeth were perfect, all of them straight and pearl-white, damn him. “Easy. You and I will compete in a bullfight to show who the real man is. No big deal, right? Not for a warrior who’s always showing off his *manliness*.”

“Say what?”

“Good luck, Shooter,” said Cassandra with a nod. “We’ll be cheering for you!” Her words didn’t quite match her expression; she still looked furious that I hadn’t resolved this earlier.

“Since I’m to wed you based on your skill as a warrior,” added Tanne d’Arc, “I want you to prove that you’re worthy.”

“Ah yes, it’s like this, Shooter. In a formal bullfight, our custom is to wear a single pair of underwear so that neither fighter can grab onto clothing for a throw. And since your tribe honors nudity, that’s perfect for you!”

I bit back my protests. *It absolutely isn’t perfect for me and I do not want to spend any more time buck-ass naked than I have to aauuuuughhh oh my God!*

“So be it,” Alexandricia nodded. “I’m looking forward to this, so you’d better win.”

“What if I lose?” I asked bitterly.

“I don’t think you will. But if you do trip over yourself and fail here, it’s been decided that we’ll hand you over to the minotaurs as their slave.”

Her cold words floored me. What a ludicrous world. No matter what, I had to do everything in my power to avoid falling under the tyranny of the bull-kin chieftain.

In this world, “bullfighting” was actually minotaur-style strip wrestling.

This weird little martial art had arisen as a way to honor the gods, like with sumo on Earth, as well as to allow different tribes to compete. I'm no expert on the minotaurs, but for whatever reason they had become isolated from the day-to-day world of humans, and for the most part their culture wasn't especially genteel.

Granted, some other clans living on the far end of the frontier were equally as sophisticated as Tan-Claude Van Damme's. Some were likely even more advanced. For all of that, though, these civilized guys were still making me do minotaur-style pantsing. Though I guess, speaking from personal experience, nothing says "civilized" like a decent pair of pants!

When I raised a question about this had come to be, Tanne d'Arc shrugged me off. "We have excellent weaponry, so opponents might easily injure each other if they used them during practice."

"Why not just make some practice weapons to use instead?"

"Our armor is just too sturdy. We'd be hitting one another for hours without understanding the impact."

"Wow, what a, ah, conundrum. It's almost unbelievable, y'know?"

The lovely Tanne d'Arc could have spent hours telling me all about her people's martial prowess, now that I stood before her in nothing but my g-string. Strongest weapons, strongest shields, strongest deodorants, you name it and she had a boast for it. She probably only wanted to demonstrate how superior her culture was, but a fat lot of impact that was gonna have in this pantsless wrestling match. I just smiled ruefully.

Seeing my grim smile, Tanne d'Arc seemed to think I was acknowledging the inferiority of my hornless brethren. Her smile got smugger, somehow. It was impressive. "My brother is quite good with weapons, too, of course, but he's never lost in bare-handed combat. In any case, he's the most skilled of anyone in any of the neighboring clans."

Up to that point, Cassandra had been wrapping tape around my palms in silence, but all of a sudden she stood up and snapped back at Tanne d'Arc. "Well, I'll have you know that Shooter is the best warrior in our village. He defeated a savage wyvern. He even bested Gimul with nothing but a staff!"

Gimul was looking on in silence, his thick arms crossed over his chest, but now he looked quite displeased. Cassandra caught sight of him and panicked, trailing off weakly.

Gimul coughed loudly and then, his face flushing slightly, he said, "Shut up."

"I'm...going to shut up now."

"You know, I've thought about what I could have done differently that day myself."

Cassandra blinked. "Oh?"

It was odd, wasn't it? That first day I'd written off Gimul as a worthless meathead, but he kept surprising me. The more I grew to understand his thinking, the more unexpectedly lovable I found the old lug.

First priority: his stepmother. Second priority: jealousy whenever he couldn't be with his stepmother. The guy was a big, buff Mother's Day card.

Cassandra wrapped up the tape job. I wouldn't say it was the best one I'd ever seen, but it was enough to protect my palms and toughen my hands up, and she'd done it with love.

I didn't know what fighting style my opponent would use, but I had found karate to be a pretty good all-purpose martial art. As long as I could avoid getting cornered in one spot and swapping blows, I bet I could do this.

"I hope you'll do your best, Shooter."

"Thanks, Cassandra."

"Remember," Tanne d'Arc said, "if you goof up and lose to my brother, I won't be marrying you. And my brother is the strongest in all the nearby clans, so I doubt you'll stand a chance. Tough luck, huh?"

Compared to the courageous face Cassandra had put on for me, I couldn't tell whether Tanne d'Arc was rooting for me or just trying to brag about her brother.

But no matter who was rooting for who, no matter what the stakes were, I wanted to win. I loved martial arts, so of course I hated losing. If I could get the fight to fall into a pattern I was good at, I might just have a chance at winning.

And hey, as long as I didn't wind up with a humiliating defeat, I figured just having fun in the fight would be victory enough for me. Mostly.

Still, something felt wrong about the whole thing. For one, minotaur-style pantsless wrestling would be dangerous. If he grabbed me by the underwear and threw me, he would absolutely smush my two amigos into pink salsa. He had the look of a real ball-smasher.

"That reminds me. What do I need to do to win?"

"You win once your opponent loses the will to keep fighting."

Meaning that even if the tide started turning against me, I could still tough it out to avoid a loss. But man, I hated getting hurt, so it would be tough to pull off. Not that I could say that out loud.

With my fists taped up, I gave the boisterous crowd outside a haughty once-over, then started murmuring to myself to gin up my courage.

I'd done all right in partner drills and sparring at the dojo, even right before I came to this fantasy world, but I hadn't done too hot in a competition in years. It was the spectators—whenever I was being watched, I just couldn't get my mind in that serene kung fu place. It made me nervous!

The bull-kin clan heckled me viciously. "The chieftain's gonna wipe the floor with ya!"

But the villagers were doing the same for me.

Nishka and the others were shouting, "Go for the guts, Shooter! Smash him in the organs, my guy!"

Whereas Wak'wakgoro was giving the most ridiculous advice: "Hit him in the head! One good hit, you take the head out, and then the balls are open! Get the balls and this fight is over, ya hear?"

My old karate master from Okinawa had often told me that you could easily "encourage" an opponent to stop fighting with a strike to the liver, the carotid artery, or one good hit to the sternum. Cool to know, useless for sparring matches unless I wanted to end the fight in a courtroom.

The main thing I was good at was sneaking in punches to the sternum. A strike like that is a technique to mess up the opponent's breathing rhythm. When fighting a human being, there was no way to "practice" hitting the carotid artery. It was far too dangerous to ever attempt.

But then, this wasn't my homeworld. This fantasy world had healing magic that could stitch together lacerations. I knew I wouldn't be able to fight with a true killer instinct, but I had to attack Tan-Claude Van Damme with every technique I knew short of the worst I could deal out.

"Please don't push yourself too hard, Shooter," said Tanne d'Arc.

"Don't worry, I won't. I don't need to push myself to win."

Alexandricia had told me that if I shamed myself by losing, my slave rights would be transferred to the bull-kin. There was no way I was going to surrender my newlywed life with Cassandra—the one tiny bit of happiness I'd found in this cruel world.

Holding that resolve in mind, I pulled my face into a more dashing expression to reassure her.

"Are you really so sure you should be with Tanne d'Arc?" Cassandra asked quietly. "Sure enough to fight her brother like this?"

"Huh? No, that's not why I'm—"

My wife was visibly upset, glaring daggers at me. Oh. Oh *no*. Cassandra thought I actually wanted to do this!

"All you would have to do is lose, Shooter."

"Now, hold on—listen to me! I'm doing this for you, Cassandra!"

"Don't lie to me. You may as well go ahead and beat the bull-kin chieftain, if you're so sure." She scowled, leaned in closer to me, then...suddenly her face broke into a smile, and she gave me a big kiss on the cheek. My wife was too sweet. Even now, she believed in me. She really did have faith that I was doing this for the right reasons. And I'd win it for her. I had to.

In the other party, a corps of muscular soldiers stood circled around their chieftain. They looked incredibly pumped. And naturally, even though she had

been beside me only a minute ago, I saw Tanne d'Arc over with them. Whose side was she on?

She'd put on a show of telling me, oh, it'll be soooo tough to face my brother, just prove to me that you won't lose, and idiot me had wondered if she actually hoped I *would* become her husband. But then again, maybe it was okay for her feelings about the duel to be complicated. She probably couldn't imagine her brother ever losing in a fight and didn't want to root for him to lose, either.

At that very moment she was telling her brother, "I know you'll beat him!" I smiled to myself, wondering where that girl would swing in the end.

"Hrmph. Have you ever seen me lose a bullfight before?"

"You're the strongest minotaur there is, Tan-Claude. Everybody knows it."

"Yeah, chief. She's right."

"No way are you gonna lose to some barbarian fighter," they cried in a chorus.

Tan-Claude's body was absolutely sculpted. Those muscles came from hard work in martial arts, whether he got it all practicing bullfighting or some other form. The minotaurs might have a more civilized lifestyle than these humans ever imagined, but they were still locked in an overarching feudal system. They needed a strong leader more than anything else. And Tan-Claude was ripped. Definitely in my Top Three Asskickers, after Nishka the Scalesplitter and the hella hunky Camulla.

However, strength was one thing, and technique—martial arts itself—was something else. The martial arts of my world had been catalyzed by the spread of international exchange, which had allowed techniques to refine and grow. Tan-Claude almost certainly knew how to handle himself in a fight, but my style had been cross-pollinated by an entire world of kung fu champions.

That was how I would win.

"You ready, kid?" the bull-kin chieftan snorted.

"Ha! You think I'm a kid? I'll have you know I'm thirty-two years old."

"What?! Hrmph, that's ridiculous. What kind of mind game is that, eh?"

“Believe what you want, Tan-Claude Van Damme. I’m an old-ass millennial and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

I grinned at him and—whether he fully understood or not—a shiver ran over Tan-Claude’s body. He snorted harshly.

We took up position at a slight distance from each other, then the bull-kin soldier I had first chatted with walked up to us.

“The rules of bullfighting are simple,” said Tancelot. “The duel will continue until one of you no longer has the will to fight.”

“Understood.”

“Got it.”

“No blinding, no hits to the jewels, and nothing that causes permanent damage.”

“I understand.”

“Hrmph. When death comes knocking for someone, anything could kill them. Why bother with all these fiddly rules? Aren’t rules meant to be...” and Tan-Claude locked eyes with me, “broken?”

“I promise you, the only thing you’re going to break is your dignity.”

We approached each other, eyes still locked. We were both naked from the waist up, wearing only underwear. I had my thong, and Tan-Claude wore a rope-belted loincloth. Nothing remotely like this ever happened in a karate match, but it was pretty common in pro wrestling and other martial arts events.

When two bare-chested men got close to each other, it always made me incredibly—uh, flustered. I mean, it was a fine sport, but! Every time the bull-kin chief got so near his hrmphing breath blew over my skin, I felt goosebumps prickly my arms. He was about half a head taller than me—well over six feet. Huge. And his snorting breaths were so aggressive. They were as fierce as a tempest crashing over a mountain peak.

We both drew back, once again about six feet from each other. It was a frustrating distance. Just far enough that even if we took turns lunging forward, neither of us would quite be able to land a hit on the other.

I slid into my fighting stance. It's called a "southpaw stance" in karate and other martial arts with standing throws. Bullfighting wasn't a battle to the death, after all, so I figured a one-on-one martial arts style would work. I'm right-handed, but I had a reason for adopting this left-handed position.

Back when I did kenpo, my instructor explained that by rotating my hips, opening up my chest, jumping forward, and grabbing, I could make a move with a longer reach than I would ever achieve in an orthodox attack. Once my punch broke through my opponent's guard, I could extend my upper body and hit 'em in the face with one fluid motion. The opponent would be distracted holding their guard and—for just a second—they'd be totally flat-footed.

If you can launch a punch at someone's face just by reaching a little farther, it gives them a scare. And when you manage to conceal your techniques and secret moves from a strong opponent enough to scare them, they *will* lose.

You learn these kinds of things after your own fair share of humiliations at regional competitions.

But most of all, you learn never to let a fight go on for very long.

At last, Tancelot gave the signal: "Square up and...fight!"

As soon as Tancelot gave the signal, Tan-Claude and I lunged at each other.

My mind was almost totally blank. I aimed my fist square at his face. I figured that if I took any time at all to size up the situation, Tan-Claude would get the jump on me and I'd lose. But sure enough, Tan-Claude had the same thought as me and was lunging right for my face in turn. I used my southpaw stance to throw out my right fist—and Tan-Claude threw *his* right from the orthodox stance.

But in the end, I was the one with just a little bit more of an advantage. My body was smaller, so I would always have a shorter reach than Tan-Claude. But by combining the four moves of jumping forward, rotating my hips, extending my arms, and opening up my chest, I could push my attack a fair bit farther than usual.

In contrast, Tan-Claude was using an ordinary attack, so despite his

undeniable strength, I was able to sneak my punch in under his without immediately tipping him off to what I was doing.

“Nice move, Shooter! Get him!”

“Brother?”

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I heard voices calling out from the spectators.

My hit was about to catch Tan-Claude in the face. In the middle of throwing his punch, Tan-Claude spotted my attack and dodged, throwing himself slightly off-balance. Now he couldn't get his hips behind his swing anymore.

My hit missed his chin. Still managed to smack him right in the neck. Not that one hit could win the fight. Tan-Claude Van Damme was supposed to be the strongest bullfighter around, after all.

Unfortunately, extending my body so far to throw the punch had been too desperate; my pivot foot skidded out of position. Tan-Claude saw the opportunity and took it, leaning back and catching me with a high-kick. The strike launched out in a perfect arc, like something out of an action movie. To make a kick like that while off-balance showed an incredible level of combat instinct.

I raised my arms and managed to block his leg, but it landed with a heavy thud and I felt my arm muscles fall limp at the blow. The bull-kin chieftain had known that even with my guard up, his kick would be overwhelming. If I kept using my arms to block his attacks, his hits would eventually wear me out and erode my guard.

I decided to switch to close-quarters fighting—I closed the distance between us as fast as I could. If I let Tan-Claude get away from me again, he could just unleash more of his devastating high-kicks.

I briefly considered one tactic, where you slowly sap your opponent's mobility with low-kicks, but instead I got into a position where either of our kicks would miss.

I closed in and dealt a series of backhand strikes to his face. If I targeted his face over and over again, the bull-kin chieftain would have to focus on those

blows. I had to pick the terms of the fight, had to control it.

But then Tan-Claude swung a hook at me. I had to get out of the way of that vicious strike. I folded up to try to evade, but he cracked me right in the knee. This was going downhill fast. That bastard.

His moves weren't so primitive after all; they seemed positively modern, all stuff from the martial arts revolution of the mid-twentieth century and beyond. These were recent techniques.

How had he learned these maneuvers in a world like something out of an old *Monsters and Mazes* manual?

The big innovation Tan-Claude brought to bear was his skill at moving sideways—that is, circling around someone in response to a strike—which is embedded in every style and category of modern martial arts. The older forms of karate specialize in a forward-pushing, driving kind of fighting style, so roundhouse kicks and sidestepping are an incredibly recent development.

The bull-kin chieftain matched my move to circle around him, stepping to the side to avoid exposing vulnerabilities. I was gonna have to go for that low roundhouse kick after all.

As soon as I launched into it to stop Tan-Claude from moving, he—are you kidding me?!—lifted his leg into a guard and shut me down. Then to top it off, Tan-Claude came at *me* with a low-kick. I quickly raised my leg to block him, but it didn't matter. A hammer-like blow slammed into my knee. It felt like he had shattered my whole leg.

At that point, I spotted a difference between our low roundhouses. The two techniques aimed to break different things. In my world, we struck a little above the joint, targeting the muscle along with it, but Tan-Claude's strike had zeroed in on the connection point between bones, right where my pitiful human body was at its most vulnerable.

"YeooOOOOOOOOooooowch!" I don't think I've got enough vowels here to convey just how much that hurt. It was like he'd trained his low-kick through years of Shaolin kung fu, toughening up by kicking an old wooden telephone pole for hours on end.

I had only been hit with a kick like this once, by a middle-aged person who practiced Shaolin kung fu. It had stung all the way to my marrow, and I'd toppled to the ground right then and there.

But if I moaned and cried about my pain now, Alexandricia would definitely classify that as a humiliating loss and boom, I'd be introducing myself as Mr. Minotaur Slave Shooter.

"Hrmph. What's the matter? Don't you want to attack me?"

"You're not...going to bait me that easily!" I lashed out with a middle-kick as I spoke.

Back on Earth, I was a pretty good size, so I always thought I had some decent power behind my kicks. But in this world and against a minotaur, the difference in height and build meant I was delivering nothing more than a distraction.

I struck out with a left middle-kick in the hopes of breaking Tan-Claude's guard, but again Tan-Claude showed an instinct for out-maneuvering modern martial arts. He blocked my kick with his arm and charged at me—*goddamn* it.

The bull-kin chieftain and I landed on the mat and beat at each other with mid-body attacks. What had I been thinking, trying to go close-quarters on a man literally made of beef? It was totally ineffective! We traded blows, low-kicks, whatever we could, as if it was more full-contact, imitation-karate groping than proper grappling.

If I were fighting some stranger who suddenly rushed me, I'd focus my attack on my opponent's lower guard. I was dealing with Tan-Claude's attack with that thought in mind, but the crowd wanted more violence. I heard loud booing and yells.

"Quit just circling around each other!"

"The face! Hit him in his stupid face!"

"Your guard's slipping, Shooter!"

"Is that the best the strongest warrior of a naked tribe can do?!"

As soon as we had some distance, Tan-Claude threw one of his favorite high-kicks at me.

Good. A big kick like that left a big opening.

“Keep it up!”

“Nngh!”

“Hrmph!”

His kick sliced through the air. Nope, too bad, ya bullheaded beefcake. There’d been times in my life when I had that same all-out, headlong philosophy.

But just when I thought his high-kick was going to swoop past me again, he spun and—oh shit oh no—threw a back roundhouse at me. I threw my arms up into a guard, but his foot pushed completely past them and slammed full-force into my face. This had to be breaking the rules; his legs were like hairy goddamn tree trunks.

“What are you doin’, Shooter?! Start pulverizin’ him!”

“You gotta use your legs, Shooter!”

“Oh, I know! Why don’t you hold him down with magic?”

“Try jumping on my brother’s back!”

Nishka and Wak’wakgoro jeered and yammered on at me from the stands. Buncha back-seat grapplers.

My mind was starting to cloud, but I lashed out as hard as I could with a front kick. I didn’t even get any distance first. But somehow, that knocked Tan-Claude out of his stance.

“Yes! Now throw some dust in his face!”

“He can’t do that. Blinding is against the rules!”

“You can do this, Shooter!”

“That’s not enough to beat my brother!”

If I let my attention slip for even a second to listen to them, I would lose the fight. Instead, I gestured at the spectators with one hand to say that nah, it wasn’t over, and I kept my eyes fixed on the beefy clod.

Back when I was learning with my old karate teacher, there was something he would always say: “Each technique grows from another. Use one as the fulcrum that pries open a window into your opponent’s weaknesses.” I hadn’t understood what that meant, but when he demonstrated the concept, it was simple.

My teacher grew up in the northern part of Okinawa. He was a smaller-than-average person, whereas I’m about average height and my shoulders are a little broader than usual. When my teacher matched up against me, the size difference was like an adult fighting a child.

And yet, despite my teacher having less reach, he would lure me in and then smoothly close in on me. He focused exclusively on disrupting my stance and before I realized it, his shoulder would be buried in my solar plexus and I’d fall to the mat in agony. Then he’d stand astride over me and—even though he didn’t hit me—make it clear that if this were a real fight, I would be dead.

His movements just *flowed*.

Obviously, I wouldn’t be able to recreate such fluid movements right here on the spot, but summoning up a chain of techniques rather than relying on a single attack was crucial. Like in boxing, you don’t stop once you’ve done “one, two.” It’s critical to move on to the third strike.

Bringing that same philosophy into this mudwrestling contest might give me a chance at victory—or not. If I got into a disadvantageous position during this match, Tan-Claude might not choose to put an end to the fight with one decisive strike. He could grind me into the ground and keep popping me with hits.

And for all practical purposes, there was no giving up.

I focused on resetting the match so I could switch from the breakdowns that were my best moves and introduce some finishing blows.

“What’s the matter? You’re looking a little beat. Hrmph.”

I didn’t respond. Instead, I hit Tan-Claude with a couple low roundhouses, watching his weight shift between legs, then tried to launch into another close-quarters fight. In that same instant, I tightened my fist and pounded it against

his sternum with all my might.

He had been going for a punch intended to land hard on my chin, or maybe my jaw. But I was just a little bit faster and my fist drove hard into his sternum. My old karate master taught me that strike. It landed, and I saw the minotaur's expression change. For a bull-kin, it must have been startling for a hit from a puny opponent to feel like it disrupted something inside his body.

His breathing grew ragged. I watched the shock move over his face as he realized what had happened, and I took that chance to put some distance between us.

This right-handed strike from a southpaw stance didn't have any special name, but it was the ace up my sleeve. His breath struggling and uneven, Tan-Claude instantly threw up his guard to protect against my attack.

That was his mistake. My punch snaked in below his guard just as he expected, but then changed trajectory and connected with his jaw.

Tan-Claude Van Damme fell to the ground.

One of the basics of martial arts is the art of relaxed readiness. It's a state of mind where, even after you've beaten your opponent, you remain aware of the fact that he might not actually be defeated. Always ready your next move.

I knew Tan-Claude had taken the full force of that punch, but deep inside I couldn't believe the rugged bull-kin chieftain who was overflowing with combat instincts would be knocked out of a fight so easily.

When you do martial arts for a long time, there's a technique you learn where you draw back slightly the instant an attack lands to avoid some of the impact or lessen the damage. In fact, I used this very method to get through the fight with those petty thugs working for the slave trader, ducking back when I got hit in order to lessen the damage I took.

Moreover, as a rule, karate practitioners fight with the assumption that anything they can do, their opponents can, too. And I fully expected the bullfighting minotaurs knew this very technique.

So when Tan-Claude Van Damme fell to his knees, I launched myself at him and tackled him to the ground before I had time to think. This was my chance to roll him over and get on top of his chest to land some worthwhile blows.

Tan-Claude put up almost no resistance when I tackled him, so I thought I'd be able to roll into a mount. The best possible outcome is to press down your opponent's arms with your knees and prevent them from using their legs to fight back, but since I had tackled him so quickly, I didn't manage to get one of his arms pinned quite right. Nothing I could do about that.

Instead, I clenched my fists and started pelting him with blows like an angry little child as he lay prone beneath me. I whacked him maybe four or five times around the face. But Tan-Claude was a bull-kin, so it wasn't like smacking around a human. The end of his nose towered over the rest of his face, so I didn't wind up hitting him the way I meant to.

"You got him now, Shooter! Finish him!"

"No! You can't hit him straight on like that! You gotta punch him from the side!"

That was probably Wak'wakgoro.

Oh, I get it! Punch him from the side!

I was more or less blacked out on adrenaline so I did exactly what the crowd told me to. But now there was a problem.

Minotaurs had horns like a water buffalo's, protruding menacingly from the sides of their head. If I didn't want to slice my hand open on them, I had to punch methodically. One hit, another hit, careful.

"Brother! You haven't lost yet! Don't give up!"

"Keep goin', Shooter!"

The cheers from the villagers intensified to the point that shouts for me to kill him were practically ringing around the clearing. Of course I wasn't about to do anything like that, but I wanted to take this chance to land a decisive blow. I swiveled my hips back, raised a fist with all the power I could muster, when—

"Hrmph!"

I couldn't keep Tan-Claude's right arm pinned down with my knee. He worked it free, and the second I saw him reaching for me, he was swinging his muscled arm around my neck.

All my efforts to resist crumbled. The bull-kin chief slammed his face against my head.

"Hrrk!"

Ha. Just one shot and it was gonna be over, then.

He'd already landed a sleeper hit but he just kept going, restraining me with one arm and topping it off by pounding against my forehead over and over. My damage meter was filling up really fast.

Holy shit, I was gonna die. He was gonna kill me.

I flew between awareness and oblivion with each thump to the head until finally, with the last hit, I came back to my senses. Some instinct flared up from deep inside. It was as if my unconscious mind had decided that it was kill or be killed. My body pushed past the limits of pain and began to act.

Here's what happened.

At some point, Tan-Claude broke the hold I'd put on him with my knees and started to lift me up in both arms. I slammed my knees into his cheeks, hoping to rip his face right the hell off.

(I don't think I would ever do that in a regular sparring match. I mean, for one, the referee would put a stop to it if anyone ever did that in any competition ever.)

Then, from that vicious angle, I held my weight on his shoulders and returned the blows he'd given me hit. For. Hit. I remember swinging my knee into his jaw hard enough to break it once, twice, maybe three or four times. Crack. Crack. *Crack.*

One time I failed to connect and I lacerated my knee on his horns, but instead of worrying about the pain or broken bones, I chose to keep slamming my knee into his head.

"Enough, Shooter! That's enough!"

“Shut up! Kill that oxman!”

“He’s already unconscious! Chill out!”

Before I realized what was going on, several people had rushed out of the crowd and grabbed my arms and legs. They were pulling me off Tan-Claude.

I was possessed. I have a horrible memory of knocking Wak’wakgoro out cold with one hit, not to mention swinging my arm back to hit Nishka in the face. I even landed one of my favorite pro wrestling moves—a shining wizard kick!—to handsome Camulla’s stomach. Gimul was the last one standing. He held on desperately from behind my back, restraining me as best he could. But even him I managed to toss off with a shoulder throw. And as soon as he stood back up, I dropped him with a high-kick.

So they told me.

I was beyond any mortal control, but I don’t remember any of it.

In the end, Cassandra came running into the fray, oblivious to all danger, and Tanne d’Arc followed—a fair distance behind her—and they started speaking. Talked me down, I guess.

The bullfighting match had started out as entertainment to get everyone in a good mood, but now it was anything but that. The party was canceled.

When I came to, I was inside a tent I didn’t recognize. I felt like this had happened before. I was hallucinating that I was back with the camp of adventurers on the hunting mission, the ones who had saved me from the ogres.

Nope.

“Shooter! Are you awake?”

“Man, you really walloped that guy. That was great!”

My wife’s face was the first thing that came into focus for me. Next to her, I saw white teeth flashing—Nishka. But despite her grin, the one eye I could see looked pretty angry, too.

“Heya. My name is Yoshida Shuta, thirty-two years old. I’m from the village. Get this: I was in a bullfight with a bull-kin chieftain, but I lost consciousness. Do I know you?”

“Quit messin’ around. You won, relax.”

I just realized there was a third face above me—it was the village chief. Being surrounded by all these women made me feel like I was in some kinda harem anime. But if this was my harem, where was Tan-Claude’s sister, the girl who was supposed to be my new bride?

“Um, how is Tan-Claude doing?”

“He was still unconscious at the end of the fight.”

“Was it really that bad?”

“You shouldn’t worry about it. The bull-kin were the ones who suggested the fight in the first place, and we made an honorable showing. The most important thing is that a cleric is treating him with healing magic at the church. I’m sure he’s already fully recovered.”

Thank goodness. I’d almost forgotten about that healing magic, in the heat of it...but Nishka was still giving me the hairy eyeball.

“Hey, Nishka, how did you get that black eye? It’s huge.”

“You goddamn punched me in the goddamn face, you big stupid bastard!”

“What? C’mon, I’d never do that, Nishka!”

“You idiot. You were flailing all over the place when we were trying to pull you off Tan-Claude.”

“Ah...I’m sorry...”

“I know you didn’t do it on purpose, but I gotta be angry at someone for gettin’ hit, and that someone is you.” Nishka turned away with a huff.

I felt truly awful. But, uh. Was there any possibility that the village chief might be able to make arrangements on my behalf to allow me to be treated by the cleric as well? I gave it a shot.

“You’ll have to be patient,” she said. “Wak’wakgoro got knocked out, too, and

they're tending to him right now. After him, it's my stepson's turn."

"You're kidding. Did I really go on such a rampage?"

"You certainly did. No one could stop you in that flailing, nudist rage. Your unrivaled strength will no doubt be the stuff of legend in our land before long." The village chief gave a hearty laugh, then got to her feet and stood tall once more. "But don't you ever raise your hand to a lady again. I'm going to have to confer a knighthood on you as your reward, and if word gets around that a man who beats women and children is the constable of our settlement, it'll ruin our reputation."

With that, Alexandricia left the tent. I watched her go, mouth hanging agape.

I glanced to Cassandra. "D-do you have any idea what she meant by that, dear?"

"W-well, yes. The village chief—well, the minotaur chieftain is giving you his sister for marriage, so..."

"Right..."

"And the village chief said that in order to make it a fair exchange, she would confer a knighthood on you."

"Hmph. I can't believe you punch me in the eye, and then they make you a knight! Must be nice. Hope our buck-naked slave-knight will take good care of us, his lowly henchmen."

Hold up, I was going to be a slave *and* a knight? That seemed...you know what? I'd just roll with it for now, because I was exhausted. As for the naked part—

"Of course I was naked! They made me wrestle in my underwear!"

Nishka and Cassandra exchanged a look.

Uh. What had I said?

Seeing the downcast looks on their faces made me suspicious. I tried to push myself up from the bed, but I crumpled at the debilitating pain shooting up from my right knee.

“Ow!”

The pain crashed back into my awareness and I writhed in agony.

“You shouldn’t try to move, Shooter.”

“His horns gouged you pretty good. I can see the muscle in your leg.”

Right, I’d really whanged myself on Tan-Claude’s horns when I was kneeling him. God, the pain was rough. Could I get some fantasy ibuprofen? Some vicodinmancy?

In the midst of all this, I realized for the first time that I was no longer wearing my g-string.

“Mister Naked Man! My brother wanted to know if you’ve woken up yet...” So of course at that moment, Tanne d’Arc came in to check on me, and immediately saw my goods flailing about in the open. “Eek! You disgusting flasher! Perv! How dare you expose my innocent eyes to such...dangling?”

My thong must have gotten torn off when I was straddling the bull-kin chieftain and pummeling him in the face.

I drooped. This was really adding insult to injury.

Chapter 6:

The Castle in the Woods, by the Quiet Shore

YO, THE NAME'S SHOOTER. I'm thirty-two years old and I'm a slave. Usually I'm put to work as a hunter for my village, but I was recently knighted, so *that's* weird. I live in a hunter's shack with three other people. Picture, if you will, four adults sharing a studio apartment. The hut is incredibly cramped.

"Good morning, Shooter."

"G'morning. Did you sleep okay?"

"The bed was a little snug, unfortunately," my principal wife Cassandra answered curtly.

"Um, g-good morning, Tanne d'Arc."

"Good morning, husband. Your bed is so small, I almost fell out three times last night. Can't you do something about it? Please?"

"We don't have much choice. If it weren't for your dowry, the bed would be an even tighter squeeze for us."

"Why can't you ask your barbarian chief to build a new house for you already? Didn't she say she was giving you a house as a reward?"

In celebration of my marriage to his little sister, the chieftain of the bull-kin clan had given me a double bed that was disproportionately large for our tiny shack. But I only call it large in terms of the standards of this fantasy world. Back in Japan, it might not even classify as twin-size.

My two wives and I had slept pressed up against each other like sardines, and since Tanne d'Arc was the one on the outside, she almost got pushed out of the bed whenever someone shifted during the night. We were going to have to do something about that.

"Kweeee!"

“You can’t fuss like that in the bed, Basil. And if you have to go to the bathroom, you need to wake up your mother or Tanne d’Arc. Understand?”

“Kwee kwee ppthhbbb!”

The baby basilisk had entered a rebellious phase recently, and since Tanne d’Arc had only moved in the previous night, he didn’t yet recognize her as a co-mom. He treated her worse than if she were his older sister. Another fun problem.

“Good morning, Shooter.”

“Hey there. I hope you slept all right, Elpaco.”

“Yeah. But I was a little lonely sleeping by myself.”

“Really? You seemed so cozy, though.”

Animal-eared Elpaco had agreed to sleep in the long, narrow bed I used originally. Back then, Cassandra and I were newlyweds. And now my new wife Tanne d’Arc was part of the equation. It was hard enough that circumstance had forced Elpaco to come live with Cassandra and I right after we got married, but now the kid was stuck spending the night in the same room as a newly polygamous marriage.

Ironical—I rescued him from Wak’wakgoro’s huge goblin family only for him to end up sleeping alone in a house with three newlyweds...which was another fine problem to solve. The hunter shacks were already uniformly cramped, and then we’d crammed a double bed into ours, making the living space even tinier and aaaaaaaaaAAAAAAHHHH I really, really needed to do something about this situation.

We didn’t have a third mattress to rotate anyone onto, either. Before any of this even happened, the village had run out of spare beds for all the new settlers so the village chief had taken away the pallet Cassandra slept on before she married me. Not there was room in our hut for anything superfluous.

“W-well, Elpaco and I will go tend to the fields. The two of you can take care of the laundry.”

“You can’t do that, Shooter. The village chief told you to go meet with her first

thing in the morning to discuss our housing situation, remember?” said Cassandra.

“She’s right. I want to move to a bigger house! Stuffing four of us into a tiny shack like this...” Tanne d’Arc folded her arms. “It’s like living in a slave hovel.”

“Now hold on, Tanne! I think it’s a little rude to call my husband’s house a slave hovel.”

“Our husband *is* a slave. Objectively. We’re married to a slave.”

“That may be true, but it’s rude to say it.”

I was holding my wives away from each other with both arms, but I decided this was a good opportunity to get away. I grabbed Elpaco and hurried out toward the fields. “Let’s go, Elpaco! No need for us men in their conversation. We belong out in the fields!”

“Ow! Sh-Shooter, don’t pull so hard. Shooooooterrrrrrr!”

Right as we finished up the fieldwork, I received a summons from the village chief. Both my wives had repeatedly reminded me to, “Go talk to the village chief about getting a new house ready as soon as possible!” Defeated, I went to her manor. When I got there, she ordered me to accompany her and I soon found myself on the way to the lakeshore with her, followed by a herd of goblin laborers and enslaved criminals.

Since being appointed a knight in service to Knight Commander Alexandricia, I had expected major changes to my day-to-day life, but that hadn’t turned out to be the case. I went out to the forest to hunt just like always, and the chore of going out to the fields in the morning to weed and water them was no different than before, either. The only real difference was that Alexandricia’s stepson Gimul, who had been in line to inherit leadership of the village, was gone. Without him, Alexandricia summoned me to her house all the time instead.

“I’ve decided to build a new settlement here,” she said at the lake. “And this hill overlooking the shore will be the center of it. It’s a little far from the current village, but it’s an ideal location to defend, and it will be close to the village as well as the bull-kin colony. My hope is that someday this location will be an

administrative center for the territory. I want you to take charge of some people and build a castle here—as well as an attendant settlement.”

“You want to build a *castle*? On this hill?”

“That’s right. Look how much of the land you can see from up here. We’ve managed to carve a village out of Apegut Forest, but it’s nothing more than a remote outpost on the outermost frontier as far as the kingdom is concerned. That’s how they see it. As for how I see it, we’re on the edge of vast, unclaimed tracts of land.”

Alexandricia was wearing her usual outfit that sort of reminded me of a dress, but today she was also clad in her knight’s attire. She stood atop the low rise of the hill and gazed out over the lake and the broad expanse of Apegut Forest.

She was right—the forest was vast. The lay of the forest known to the villagers only extended about half a day’s walk from the village or one of the smaller settlements. Only the hunters knew anything of the geography beyond. And nearly half of the hunters had died in the fight against the wyvern, so veterans like Wak’wakgoro and Nishka were the only ones with any detailed knowledge of the area.

The village chief wanted to change that. That was why the adventurers we had brought back from town were currently employed in making those maps.

“Since our village is just an outpost, up ’til now we’ve grown by letting people build houses more or less wherever they wanted.” The village chief turned her eyes down to the people gathered below us. “That changes now. I intend to build a settlement here beside the lake so that we can develop into a town in permanent control of this area.”

“I see. So that’s the objective?”

“That’s right. You saw what Bulka was like. And you must have noticed something when you compared it to my village. Didn’t you?”

“Our buildings look piss-poor compared to them.”

“It hurts to hear it put so bluntly, but yes, that’s exactly what I’m referring to.” Alexandricia planted a hand on her hip and laughed musically.

The town of Bulka featured neat avenues of cobblestone streets and stone houses. Meanwhile, the houses in our outpost village consisted of mud walls piled around a central wooden column and capped with a thatched roof. From the outside, they looked like triangular huts.

They were like the crude houses widely used during the settlement of Hokkaido in the late 1800s, the ones called “prayer huts”—not because they were churches or anything, but because when viewed from the side, they looked like hands steeped in prayer.

But in some ways, the huts in the village were completely different from the “prayer huts” of Hokkaido’s settlement period. Back on Earth, the prayer huts were a temporary solution thrown together in desperation until the settlement stabilized and they could begin harvesting crops. In this world, the bedraggled huts were constructed when the settlement was first established, and they continued to be built to this day. They were certainly larger than the huts I’d visited on field trips or whatever, and the ones in my world didn’t have mud walls, but those weren’t huge differences.

“We never knew if our work to reclaim the land and establish our settlement would fail, so we never cultivated the ambition to build sturdier houses until now,” Alexandricia explained.

I nodded. “And when the number of residents increases, you’ll need to provide permanent housing anyway. And a castle to keep it all defensible.”

She nodded in turn. “I am the governor of this region, and I must protect my people. It’s not enough to simply protect my own village. I need a fortification that can accommodate everyone from the surrounding settlements in case of emergency.”

“I understand. In which case, the houses should all be surrounded by the castle walls...” I touched a hand to my chin and thought the problem over. I watched as some goblins hauled timber freshly cut from the forest to the planned construction site. There were fewer than fifty people working below, but that was all we could spare right now.

“There’s a strict difference between a town and a village, Shooter. Do you know what it is?”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t.”

“The laws of the kingdom define a town as having city walls. There are about one thousand people in our village, which is relatively large for such a settlement, but we’re still considered a village, even though there are several towns around Bulka with fewer people. Once they have city walls, they have the privilege of becoming a proper town.”

“So we need walls. Does that mean we’re going to build those later on?”

“No. Towns and villages pay different amounts of tax to the king. In order to prosper from this expansion, we need to remain a ‘village’ as long as possible. Of course, we won’t be able to bend the rules forever,” the village chief said. So, she intended to bring the village up to the level of a town but keep it categorized as a village as long as possible for the sweet tax break. “However, the powers on our borders consider this unclaimed land. Just as the bull-kin had their eyes on it, so do many others.”

“Which means we do need ramparts, or something similar.”

“Precisely.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand, ma’am. What’s the difference between a castle wall and a city wall? I mean, couldn’t a stone wall qualify as either a castle or a city wall?”

The strangest look came over the village chief’s face. It was as if she didn’t know what I was asking. “Yes, I suppose it could.”

“So then, for instance, suppose we built up an earthwork mound and put wooden fencing around the houses. Would that qualify as a city wall?” I asked.

“The word ‘town’ signifies a central location that permanently governs the area around it. So a place surrounded by earthworks or fencing would be nothing more than an encampment.”

“So that option is available to us, as well. For our...‘village.’”

“But wooden fences on top of dirt mounds are far too unreliable to protect a permanent territory. Not to mention the amount of labor it would take to repair them. And they would be completely unreliable for protecting the

houses.”

I’m pretty sure she knew what I was getting at, though.

“Hm,” Alexandricia murmured, tilting her head to one side as she fell into thought.

Even in the world I came from, there were plenty of legal loopholes that anyone—rich or poor—could learn to exploit. In any world, you’ve got to try your best to take advantage of those.

“And one other thing,” I said, “is it possible to bend the definition by building part of the wall as a true rampart and then making another part out of the fenced mounds? That way we would be able to build stone walls at the most important places and close the rest off with more easily constructed fencing.”

“Well now...”

I’d read about fortifications like the Taga Stronghold and Dewa Stockade in history textbooks and articles. Long ago, during the northern expansion of the Japanese imperial government, the imperial forces built governmental and military strongholds that allowed them to advance into the northern territory and settle there, despite violent clashes with the powers native to the area. I remembered an artist’s reconstruction in one book showing fortifications of clay mounds and wooden fences built all the way around the strongholds.

There weren’t many historical examples of villages completely surrounded by walls, but at that time, the fighting with the native tribes was especially heated, so the fortifications were built to allow settlers to flee their homes and take refuge inside the stronghold if they needed to.

“That’s an interesting suggestion, Shooter.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Do you think it would work?”

“As long as the colony isn’t completely enclosed by earthworks or ramparts, I think I should be able to talk my way out of trouble. If you leave just a few places open, then the fortifications would be too deficient to qualify as city walls and we could argue that we’re not a town.”

“Would that work?”

“Even if we do become a town someday, we don’t have enough resources or people to do it yet. So we can just say we’re not at that stage.” Alexandricia chuckled conspiratorially. Her expression was more devious than I’d ever seen it before. It was the face of ambition itself. Not an innocent ambition, either; she seemed to be reaching toward something far in the distance, beyond anything I could picture.

“If I may ask, what do you envision once the settlement has advanced and we’ve extended your territory?”

“I’m not sure what to call it. Redemption, perhaps?” the village chief said.

I frowned. “Redemption?”

“When I was younger, I was in the military for quite some time, serving as a knight in the royal palace and in Bulka. The royal palace is an endless performance, a bloody theater where power struggles play on and on. The nobility band together and pull strings with the king, the royal family, and powerful nobles to decide whether a group should be allowed to live or not.”

“Wow...”

“You know that I’m half-goblin, yes? That’s why I still look so young. The nobility of backwater territories along the borders always laughed at me and treated me like a child. It went on for years, Shooter. It filled me with resentment for the blood-drenched stage of the kingdom’s political theater. When I was married off to a family near where I grew up, it was a relief.”

I nodded sympathetically.

“The man I married had a distasteful predilection for goblin women. He was the successor to a noble military family of no fortune.” The village chief might have been talking about another person’s life, for how casual she sounded about it all. “When I first met him, he was a monumental fool who had caught a venereal disease from flinging money at women from barbarian tribes while he was serving on the front lines. He started to feel strange, so he went to a religious order for treatment, but they told him he was too far gone. I realized I had to build a place in the world for myself on my own. My husband ignored his disease and went out to subjugate a tribe of barbarians, and that’s how he died. We had only been married for a year.”

“What terrible misfortune.”

“Hm. It seems to me that most men are like that. You stare at my chest every chance you get.”

“Ha ha ha! What a wonderful joke, madam.”

I had at that moment been examining the way her dress fell across her bosom. I quickly averted my eyes. Alexandricia’s breasts were on the small side compared to Nishka or my new wife Tanne d’Arc—I wouldn’t quite call them bazongas, and certainly not bodahogazongas, though they *might’ve* qualified for zongas—but the allure of a widow with breasts that size was immeasurable.

I found it difficult to resist. I just couldn’t do it. I’m not a bad person!

“Just be sure it’s never anything more than a joke. I played matchmaker for Cassandra and Tanne d’Arc, so if anything were to happen, it would reflect poorly on me.”

“Y-y-y-yes, of course, madam.”

“All right, then. On with our little tale. When the chief of this village, my late husband, approached me to become his second wife, I was hesitant. I thought I might catch his venereal disease, and if word got out that his wife was half-goblin, I didn’t think it would go over well.”

“But then you inherited the village chiefhood.”

“Correct. I found it difficult to go back home to live with my parents after my husband died, and the fact that I had goblin blood in my veins didn’t sit well with people. Nothing had changed at the royal palace or in town. So I came to my husband’s village.”

Alexandricia had been through so much more than I’d known. I wished there was something I could do, even in some small way, to make up for all the suffering she’d endured.

“What were you looking for?” I asked. “A way out? A place to belong?”

The village chief let out a quick breath. “Who can say? But now I know what I must do.”

“Oh?”

“It’s been ten years since my husband died so suddenly, but he left me with my stepson, who was kind enough to love his father’s widow like a mother. The settlement I built with my husband has grown so much.”

“It has.”

“Nothing has come easily in my life, but this land on the outskirts of the kingdom is brimming with possibility. People get fifty or sixty years at most to live their lives, and I have almost half of mine left ahead.”

Alexandricia tightened her grip on the parchment survey she held. “I intend to use what remains of my life to build my own town in this place. And if at all possible, I will usurp the kingdom and drive the fools screaming from their castle.”



“Are you serious?” She was still so blasé!

A sinister smile came over her face. “Of course. *If at all possible*. The king ordered my husband to colonize the borderlands, and it has been nothing but trouble and suffering ever since. It’s always trouble and suffering, bleeding down from the ones at the top to drown the ones at the bottom. I think it’s high time the people of this village were repaid for their work. You don’t agree?”

The village chief turned her gaze on me, her eyes sparkling with hunger.

I had no place commenting on the difficulties of settling out here, but she wasn’t wrong, exactly. These frontier lands were rife with ogres, kobolds, and minotaurs, not to mention wyverns and basilisks. I could easily imagine how impossibly difficult things must have been for the settlers even before my arrival.

But the audacity of declaring that a village chief would usurp the kingdom if at all possible was something else entirely. It was a dangerous idea.

I wasn’t too familiar with feudalism in Europe, but I don’t think such ambitions were very common back then. Even looking at Japanese history, you could count on one hand the number of people who had thought about overthrowing the imperial family. The only people I could even think of were Taira no Masakado, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, and Oda Nobunaga.

“Well, I am your slave, ma’am. If you order me to do something, I have no choice but to do it.”

“That doesn’t sound very enthusiastic. What do you want? Hm?” Alexandricia fixed me with a bewitching gaze, as if testing me.

I swallowed. The inscrutable charm of this widow set my heart racing.

“I suppose my rewards for you haven’t been well suited for each other. It’s difficult to build a family and also serve as my knight.”

“What do you think would balance them out, Alexandricia?” Could this be something good? A positive development? Could Alexandricia end up my wife...? But as soon as the words left my mouth, I knew I’d made a mistake. I was always calling her “Alexandricia” in my head, and now I’d accidentally said

it out loud.

“Alexandricia, eh?” she chuckled. “I didn’t know we were on a first-name basis.”

“W-well, you are younger than me, after all. And you’re practically family, with everything you’ve done for me,” I replied boldly, grinning at her. I didn’t try to weasel my way out of my mistake.

“Oh? Then if we’re family, I hope you’ll listen when your little sister asks you for a favor. Older brother.”

“B-brother?!”

“I have a little sister already, but I’ve never had a brother. And now I have a big, strong elder brother to start relying on. As for your reward...”

“Yes?” I gulped.

The widow gave another alluring chuckle. Then, in a teasing tone more suited to a much younger girl, she declared, “When the two of us are alone, how about I call you that? I’ll talk to you like...hm. Family. Not blood family, but...” She smirked. “Get cracking on expanding my territory, O brother mine!”

And unfortunately for me, her big brother assented immediately.

Man, she was good at this. I don’t think I’d ever felt so pathetic and so happy at the same time.

In the next few days, crowds of people started tromping back and forth along a deer trail connecting the village to the lakeside. To Alexandricia, this was the image of her plan beginning to take shape.

One day, about ten after we began construction on the lakeside settlement, I was heading out to the worksite by the lake early in the morning with Elpaco and my wife Cassandra.

Since my family had grown, I was able to finish up my morning chores in the field a lot quicker, and for that I was grateful. Plus, with two wives, the washing was done and lunches got packed quick. When the housework was finished, I would take Elpaco and one of my wives with me out to the worksite.

“I thought maybe we should build a real road along this deer trail, but the village chief said it would get easier to walk on before long, and she was right.”

“Just by people moving back and forth every day, packing down the earth.”

“It’s still not quite wide enough for two people to walk side by side. If we’re going to move the base of operations for the territory here, I’ll request that Alexandricia assign some folks to widening it once the construction load has lightened a little,” I mused, moving to the head of our group.

Knight Commander Alexandricia’s lakeside castle, the defensive stronghold of Apegut Forest, was our top priority. But there were nowhere near enough people at the construction site. For now, a group of dwarven carpenters were hard at work handling the initial stages of the castle.

“Shooter?”

“What is it, Cassandra?”

Cassandra’s hands were full carrying our lunches to the site. She looked up at me timidly and cautioned, “If Gimul hears you referring to the village chief by her first name, I don’t think he’ll like it.”

“Oof. You’re right. I’ll try to be more careful.” I guess I had stopped paying attention and was blabbing the village chief’s first name all the time now.

The daily routine was that when we finished our work for the day and returned to the village, I would send my family on ahead to our shack while I turned toward the village chief’s manor. It was there that the two of us, both full-grown adults over thirty, could engage in scandalous banter, stepping over every line of intimacy to call each other “elder brother” and “Alexandricia” as we’d promised that day by the lake. I suppose I was so used to it now that it was starting to slip into my regular conversations, too.

“Shooter?”

“Hm?”

I was fighting my embarrassment, trying to change the mood hanging over us, when I felt Elpaco tug on my leather vest. His animal ears twitched. As soon as I looked at him, I understood. I grabbed the handle of the shortsword hanging at

my waist with one hand and with the other motioned for Cassandra to stay still.

“Was it an animal?” I asked.

“No, it was a person,” he said. “Someone’s watching us.”

“Do you think they intend us harm?”

“I’m not sure. But I don’t think they can do anything from where they are.”

“What about bow attacks?”

I scanned the deer trail that ran through the forest all the way to the lakeshore. My eyes jumped to follow Elpaco’s gaze. The trees grew so thickly that an ambush with bows and arrows seemed plausible, and I wanted to be sure.

“Not at this distance. I think they’re at least a hundred paces away. Nothing but the strongest bows would be able to fire through cover this thick.”

“Don’t forget, you actually know someone who could pull it off,” I said. “Don’t take anything for granted.”

“Do you mean Nishka?” Cassandra cut in, her expression fearful.

“I mean, she could, but she wouldn’t. I just meant that people like that exist.”

“Mm. I don’t get the sense that this person is about to do anything,” said Elpaco.

“Not until we start moving again, I’m sure. Elpaco, you take up the rear. You walk between us, Cassandra. I’m counting on you if anything happens, Elpaco.”

“Okay...”

The three of us crept slowly toward the worksite, sensing something hidden out of sight in the woods.

Why would anyone go to such trouble to stalk us? Was it a bandit? A villager? Or maybe one of the minotaurs from the newly absorbed settlement? All seemed equally likely to me.

“It’s got to be a bandit, a villager, or one of the bull-kin, right?” I said.

“I don’t know, Shooter,” said Cassandra.

“I don’t think it’s one of the bulls. They make more noise when they walk,” Elpaco’s voice answered from behind me.

“Ugh, I’m the daughter of a hunter. I should know these things!”

“I really am a hunter and I don’t know, either. There’s no reason to be upset.”

“Y-you’re right, Shooter.”

“Elpaco’s animal ears must be superior to ours. Wak’wakgoro and Nishka can hear things far off like that, too. Maybe I’ll develop that ability with some more hunting experience.”

I turned back to Elpaco. His face glowing pink, the boy lowered his eyes. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

I let out a sigh of relief. “We’re pretty far from them now. I think we’ll be okay.”

“You sure are helpful, Elpaco!”

“It’s nothing special.”

“We’re almost to the worksite, so let’s ease off. But if you notice anything strange on the way back home, let me know right away. If something happens, I want you to protect my wife and take her back to the house. And let the village chief know what happened.”

Elpaco’s face glowed with girlish pride, despite the whole not-a-girl thing. While he looked pleased at my praise, his face suddenly turned cloudy again at the second half of my instructions.

“What are you upset about?”

“You want me to leave you behind, but that means you’ll be in danger. I can’t do that to you.”

“He’s right, husband. You’re the bedrock of our family. You mustn’t think so selfishly. Isn’t that right, Elpaco?”

“Yeah.”

The two were really worrying about me together. It was actually kind of nice to be worried about. Heh. I could almost feel the tears welling in my eyes.

At which point I slammed my big, dumb toes into a big, dumb rock and nearly twisted my ankle.

“Waugh!”

That’s what I got for not wearing boots.

When you’re a husband, you gotta put your wife first, but you’re not the only one trying to put the other first. I’d have to give that some thought.

As soon as I got to the worksite, I always held a morning meeting. But on that day, there was something I wanted to do first.

I’ve always tried to leave home as early as I could to get to work, and I stuck to that even here in fantasyland. Although I wasn’t the first person at the site that day, I had still arrived pretty early. When you manage that, you have a moment to catch up with your coworkers and managers and the like.

We dropped our lunches and carpentry tools off at the construction shed that stood atop the hill where we were planning to build the castle. I spotted a group of laborers—their numbers just kept growing as people trickled in—and saw my chance. I’d never be able to build up a relationship with these people if I didn’t make a little effort to talk to them.

“Hey there,” I said. “I heard bringing in the stones has been slow going.”

“Oh, it has, Sir Slave,” one replied. “The road isn’t paved, and the stones are coming in by the river next to the village—I guess you know that already, ha. It feels like a big detour to bring them down the river, but I’m not gonna say it isn’t efficient!”

“Yeah, the quarry is pretty far from here, after all.”

The workers building the castle were some dwarves from the village, carpenters, and builders. The carpenters, well, were carpenters—as their job title implied, they specialized in fabricating buildings. And think of the builders like construction workers.

Under normal circumstances, we’d have to spare some of the builders to work on our flimsy huts, but at present all our resources were concentrated on

building the castle and there weren't enough people for both projects. We still didn't have too many stones on site, though, so about half the builders were just doing basic construction work for the surrounding castle settlement.

"The plan was to get three houses built in the next couple days. How's that going?" I asked. "The ones I saw only had scaffolding up, but none of the framework was done yet."

"Well, you know how it is. With the number of builders we have right now, we figured we would get all that scaffolding finished first. You know, just get it out of the way."

"Smart."

"It's the obvious thing to do. We've been constructing houses in the village and outer settlements for years now. And when we start building your house, you don't worry about a thing. We'll pick out the very best materials for you, Sir Slave. You just wait."

"Hey now, don't say that too loudly!" I protested. No one was supposed to display any kind of favoritism...not *overtly*. Some might call that an abuse of power, but it's just one of the perks of leadership! "Well, I look forward to seeing your work, boss."

As the dwarven carpenter and I chatted, I made sure to check on the progress of the houses. This carpenter was a supervisor for a portion of the workers and had given them orders to construct the new homes. I figured one of those might be my own future abode, so I couldn't help but feel a little anxious.

We were looking to have people move into these houses starting next spring, which was just about how much time it would take to actually finish constructing them. So, we were planning to build new housing in the village first.

I know it sounds like duplicating work, but the plan was for me and my family to move out of the hunter shack and into a new house in the village, and then to move again once the settlement by the lake was finished. Our house in the village, then, could be given to new arrivals.

"What's the progress like on clearing the field for the city square?" I asked.

“The way the construction is going so far, even if we clear out the weeds and work the land now, we’re just going to have to do it over and over again, no?”

“Don’t you worry,” he said, “I’m working on that. It’ll be done before you know it.”

“Be careful you don’t work the crews too hard. That could be bad news.”

“If that ever happens, you and me’ll just kill the lot of ’em. Isn’t that right, Sir Slave?” chuckled Nishka, who was passing by.

“Uh, I certainly hope it never comes to that. We don’t have any manpower to spare!”

The enslaved criminals were the ones cutting down the vegetation and digging up stones to create a vacant plot of land for the village square. Nishka the Scalesplitter was directing that group, but her interpersonal skills were as harsh as ever. Sure, she would address me politely enough as “Sir Slave,” but there still wasn’t a shred of respect in her attitude.

Though really, I was grateful to have such a relaxed relationship with someone.

Once I’d chatted with the dwarven supervisor, I noticed that the group of slaves working under Nishka were staring hard in my direction. The look in their eyes even freaked out Cassandra, and she hid behind me.

It was a look of resentment. I could tell. In their minds, I had the same belly piercing as they did, and yet they were still treated as slaves while I was elevated to knighthood. There wasn’t much I could do about how much they hated me. Here they were, the lowest caste in the village, and they thought that I—another slave—was looking down my nose at them. Couldn’t blame ’em, honestly.

I took a rolled-up parchment scroll from the basket that hung from my shoulder and sighed. I just wanted this project to be done. “All right, everyone. I hope we’re all ready to work hard today! Remember, safety first. And when you’re carrying lumber, be sure to check your surroundings carefully. And always communicate with each other!”

Maybe they’d listen, or maybe they wouldn’t care about anything I had to say.

Only so much I could do—I pulled off my leather vest and joined the ranks of the workers to start carrying stones.

The castle that Knight Commander Alexandricia had ordered wasn't on the same scale as the fairy tale castles people usually imagine when they hear the word.

Coming from Japan, I picture castles with Japanese-style towers where a gruff dude with a topknot hangs out, or a more modern German-style castle with rows of Cinderella-like pointed towers that could have come straight from a Grimms' fairy tale. But nope—the finished plan sketched on my parchment was more like a fortress of stacked stone blocks, with a few attached buildings spidering out that looked like churches or towers.

"We can haul stone here all day long and never finish building this castle," I moaned.

"Don't give up, Shooter," said Elpaco. The two of us were heaving stone after stone to the site on shoulder yokes.

The stones had been carved down to the shape of bricks, more or less neatly—there were different sizes, see, and they were to form the foundation and castle walls. Any gaps between them would be filled in with clay. We were going to lift the stones using a wooden crane built on the struts and catwalks of the castle's wooden frame, but the interior walls would be the same clay walls that the village had always used, built using earth magic and then fired at the end to harden them.

This last part would be done by the village chief. She knew the site well, now—she came every afternoon.

"I used to work at a construction site and I've built stage sets for a theater," I said to Elpaco. "I think what we're doing today is more like the job building stage sets. Nowadays, a lot of building construction is done with machines. But this...this reminds me of hauling stage platforms around."

"I thought you were a warrior, Shooter?"

"I was. But before I came here, I was more of a, uh, part-time warrior. A

wanderer from one gig to the next, going wherever the wind took me.”

“You’re amazing...”

“Oh, no, no. I just never managed to become a good grown-up and get a regular job. You shouldn’t praise me for that!”

“But being able to do all kinds of things is amazing. Right?”

Elpaco and I finished heaving the stones to the top of the hill and took a short break. Sweat dripped down my upper body. I wiped it away with the cloth that hung around my neck. Elpaco was soaked with sweat, too, to the point that his white lace-up shirt had become see-through. It hung open in the front.

I couldn’t help giving him a sidelong glance, not quite able to resist the “see-through” part. His shirt was made of thick material, so I couldn’t make out all the details, but the cloth was just transparent enough to let me make out the curve of a pair of tiny rosebuds.

If Elpaco hadn’t been a man in a girl’s body, for sure my heart would have started racing. Which it wasn’t, obviously. Pert little peaks pressed into the cloth of his shirt, and it absolutely was not driving me crazy. Nope.

“What is it, Shooter? Don’t look at me like that...” Elpaco blushed. “It’s embarrassing...”

“I-If you let the sweat sit on your skin, you’ll catch a cold and we don’t want that. Is Cassandra around?” Worried, I called out to ask if anyone had seen my wife, who was, like me, a straight person.

Since Cassandra was now the wife of a knight in the ruling class of the village, her rank allowed her to get out of working alongside everyone else if she wished. Obviously, my retainer Elpaco and I were both in the same position, but we at least wanted to help make up for the delays and joined in with the other workers. Meanwhile, Cassandra usually stayed at the work shed and oversaw general progress at the site.

“You called for me, Shooter?” Cassandra walked up to us with a smile.

“Elpaco sweated through his clothes. They’re soaking wet. Will you take him to get changed and rest a while?”

“Certainly. You must have worked very hard, Elpaco!” Cassandra looked down at Fuzzball, who was just a tiny bit shorter than her.

“Oh, um.”

“I’ll take over while you sit right here and relax,” I told him. “This job isn’t going to be done any time soon, so how about we take turns?”

“Okay...”

I glanced at Elpaco’s head and realized I was stroking his hair out of habit. Until then, he’d looked like he was ready to keep working alongside me, but that look shifted to a more placid expression and his tail started swaying. What a good pup. Not that Elpaco was a dogman—his tail didn’t typically wag like crazy whenever he was happy.

“I’m gonna start hauling stone again. This shortsword is just getting in my way, though. Would you hold onto it for me?”

“Certainly, husband. Try not to push yourself too hard.”

“I won’t. And shouldn’t you two find some shade? It’s pretty hot out.”

“All right. Let’s go find some shade and take a rest, shall we, Elpaco?”

“Okay...”

I handed Cassandra the shortsword that usually hung at my waist. I had tried wearing it at my hip in order to act the part of a valorous knight, but it did nothing but get in the way while I worked, so I had to get rid of it. Not to mention, shedding more equipment when I already had my shirt off made me feel that little bit lighter on my feet.

“Sir Slave?” one of the dwarven carpenters called to me. “The village chief said that some more laborers would be joining us this afternoon to help out. Did you hear?”

“I did, but I can’t remember... Did she say they were new enslaved criminals from town, or something else?”

“Oh no, sir! She’s simply recruited people from the settlements in the area. It’s almost summertime, after all. That means there isn’t much left to do in the fields, so they’re sending people over to us.”

It was July, or something like it. Soon enough the temperature would skyrocket. In the Middle Ages in Japan, this time of year was when all the work in the fields was done, and they called it “war season.” Farmers would be conscripted, armed with pikes, and used as foot soldiers. Wars weren’t so common in this world, so instead the farmers were roped into construction work for their territorial leader once summer rolled around. Last year they’d been set to work on irrigation channel maintenance, I heard, and this year the only change was that we were putting them on castle construction.

The castle was going to be kind of like the trademark image of the territory, so the village chief was treating the project with due seriousness.

“They probably won’t buy new enslaved criminals for a bit. If you put a bunch of them together all at once, you’re just asking for trouble if they ever stir things up. And if your neighbors find out you had to put down a slave rebellion, well. That doesn’t look too good, does it?”

“I guess you have a point. Although, you know, now this village is the kind of place that lets a slave serve as a knight, whatever that means.”

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot you used to be a slave, Sir Slave!”

The dwarf laughed boisterously, but I couldn’t help frowning. The more I thought about it, there was no denying that I was exquisitely dressed for my ongoing adventures as literal, actual slave labor.

The early summer sun shone down on us, catching a glimmer on my belly-button piercing.

“It looks like some of the carpenters didn’t come today,” I noted. “Do you think they weren’t feeling well?”

“Certainly not! They’ve gone to build your new home, Sir Slave!”

“Really?”

“Of course. Didn’t you hear the village chief boasting about how they’d get the whole thing built in one day as soon as the materials were ready?”

I hadn’t heard about that, although she *had* told me that she would give me a new house as a reward if I beat the bull-kin chieftain—that is to say, if talks with

the minotaurs went well. Alexandricia had also told me she was a talented earth mage, so I guess the implication might have been that she would take care of it herself. Huh.

“I bet they’ve made you a marvelous hunter shack.”

“I hope not! With two wives and a boarder, I’m going to need way more space to stay sane.”

“Oh, don’t you worry. We can’t have a knight living in some shabby old hut!” The dwarf laughed again.

It made me uncomfortable—I didn’t see what was so funny about what he’d said. But I put the feeling aside and just replied, “I guess not.”

At noon, Cassandra and Elpaco came over to let me know it was time for lunch.

I leaned back against a large boulder—I was lucky that they hadn’t moved it from the lakeshore—ready to dig in. Nishka joined us and we began our lunch break.

“What did you pack today?” Nishka asked.

Cassandra smiled. “You don’t get enough nutrition only eating steamed potatoes day after day, so today I made a green bean and rabbit stew. And some rye bread.”

“I’ve got jerky. There’s more wyvern meat than I know what to do with back at my place, so here. Take some! C’mon, take it!”

We had all been beaming expectantly over the food Cassandra laid out when Nishka unfolded her own filthy lunch cloth to trumpet her jerky. The rest of us wrinkled our noses.

For one, Cassandra had eaten smoked wyvern meat almost every day while I was gone and she looked like she was tired of it. For another, tough, stringy wyvern was beyond unappetizing. It was like a hole in the platonic *concept* of appetizing. Antipetizing. Elpaco’s usual vacant expression was gone and he had his eyes locked on the ground in front of him. Fuzzball was a hunter from the

city, so you might think he'd be eager to try some wild country cuisine, but even he looked disgusted.

"C'mon, what's with those faces? If meat makes you stronger, just imagine how it feels to get some Lizard King meat down that gullet! Eat up!"

"No, thank you," said Cassandra delicately. "I've had my fill of wyvern lately."

Elpaco nervously added, "I'm good, too, thanks."

Nishka looked like she was about to have a major pout, so I reached out to take some of the jerky to make her feel better. It flapped unpleasantly in my hand. I don't know how it did that, but it absolutely waggled.

"Shooter, wyvern meat is tough. It's not good for your stomach," Elpaco warned me quietly.

Once lunch was over, the promised workforce of builders arrived and gathered around. As always, since I wanted to convey that the work would be bearable, I joined in. Once we were all together, you couldn't tell at a glance who was the leader and who were the workers. In fact, Cassandra was the one who looked like she was in charge of the whole worksite. She wore the clothes she'd made from the fine cloth I'd bought in town, and my shortsword was slung from her waist. I felt kind of pathetic in comparison.

I guess it didn't matter that much, as long as the castle got built. A person's appearance has nothing to do with how well they get their work done.

"All right, everyone," I said. "Starting today, we'd like you to help out with building a castle on top of this hill here."

Dead silence.

"The carpenters will handle the more complicated work," I continued. "But we need your help to carry in the supplies."

One man stepped forward, looked suspiciously at me, and said, "Awful rich, innit. A slave like you, daring to give us orders."

In that instant, the dialogue between the workers and I turned ass-puckeringly sour.

The man fixing me with a harsh glare was a farmer around thirty years old dressed in a dirty peasant's shift. His body hardened by daily farm work, his whole air was of a top-notch, energetic worker. He wasn't as built as Gimul, but he had the hard-edged features and physique characteristic of a man who spent his life doing punishing fieldwork.

Whereas I stood before him shirtless with a pierced belly-button that advertised my status as a slave.

Now, a half-naked man wasn't exactly an uncommon sight at the worksite. When you have to carry heavy scaffolding lumber or dressed stone, you get drenched in sweat and caked in dirt and grime. Most of the laborers and carpenters were half naked and no one gave it a second thought. But I was supposed to be the site supervisor, so seeing me half naked with my slave piercing exposed was, I now realized, perhaps kind of an issue.

"What's a slave doing running a construction operation? Who do you think you are?"

I'd taken a grave misstep. In most circumstances, you wouldn't expect to see a site supervisor with his shirt off, working and sweating alongside his guys. Worse yet, these people weren't villagers at all. They came from the settlements scattered around the village chief's territory.

They had no idea who I was. I had to head this guy off.

"I apologize. There's been a misunderstanding." My first impulse told me it would be wise to be humble. This was going to be all kinds of trouble, so I yielded immediately and hung my head.

"Harrumph! Answer my question then, slave. Who are you?"

"My name is Shooter. I'm a hunter."

"They let you be a hunter, even though you're a slave?"

"Yes—I was a hunter before I became a slave." I ducked my head in a polite semi-bow, wondering just how much of an introduction I was going to need to give this guy. The village chief had mustered these laborers to help with the construction work. I couldn't afford to say anything that would upset them or lead to an argument.

After all, the village chief was the one who had appointed me as the site supervisor. If a dispute broke out, it might lead some people to question her authority, and that would cast doubt on Alexandricia's leadership. On top of that, the enslaved criminals seemed particularly irked that I was in charge of the project, and that could make things even worse. I couldn't let this get out of hand.

I desperately thought back over all my past part-time jobs, trying to remember something, *anything* that came close to this situation.

Cassandra and Elpaco had been watching from a distance, but I could see the color draining from their faces. They rushed over to me. I tried to keep my eyes on the group—didn't want to risk looking away—but I threw just one sideways glance at my wife and Fuzzball. "J-just a moment please, folks."

Cassandra jumped between me and the villagers, her hands spread. Today she wore a checker-print shirt and bib dress, and still had my shortsword at her hip. "What exactly is going on here?!"

Elpaco held back beside her, ready to draw his knife at any moment.

"There's no reason to fight! The village chief ordered Shooter to take charge of the site!"

"And who are you? We came here 'cause the village chief said we'd be workin' for a knight to build a castle. Where's Gimul? I thought the knight was gonna be Gimul."

"I am Cassandra, the wife of that very knight. Gimul is no longer with us—he has gone to the bull-kin colony in search of a wife."

"Gimul's with the bull-kin? I never heard about that." That news seemed to throw the square-jawed spokesman for the farmers off-balance. He turned back to the rest of the group and the lot of them fell into a nervous, confused conversation.

I couldn't let my wife handle the situation forever, so I stood straight and gestured for her and Elpaco to step back.

"Are you all aware," I said, "that the village chief held talks with the bull-kin a few days ago?"

“No, we never heard a thing. The hell happened with the minotaurs to set off all this?”

“Do you see that big cave beside the lake? The minotaurs have carved an entire city out of a huge cavern in the deepest reaches of the cave.”

“They did?”

Seeing the shock on the farmers’ faces, Cassandra and Elpaco nodded in confirmation.

“How did they manage that in such a place?” The farmer’s eyes flashed. “Is that why we’re building a fort here? To fight them?”

“No.”

“Well, could you explain, then?”

“Yes, fine, I will.”

Wracking my brain for a useful memory, I kiiind of found one. I once worked at a classy bar, and at that sort of place, you inevitably mess up dealing with customers. I tried desperately to remember how I handled that precise situation. What had I said?

Well, I’d gone low profile. Let ’em shout, let ’em complain, all while I bowed my head and kept quiet. When I did that, the other person started demanding an explanation. And if I was going to give them excuses, that was my chance.

I wasn’t about to lose this opportunity. I explained it all: That in exchange for allowing the minotaurs to live in her territory, the village chief had demanded they pay taxes. That we had held a feast to strengthen our bonds, and that we had cemented our commitment with an exchange of pledges.

“It was during the feast that I fought the bull-kin chieftain in their traditional pantsless wrestling style called bullfighting. It was only meant to be entertainment for the feast, but—” I tried not to look too self-absorbed, and I think I did as great a job as usual, “—I just so happened to take the victory.”

“You? A slave? That’s preposterous. I don’t believe you.”

“That’s why I’m here, actually. The village chief rewarded me by conferring a knighthood on me.”

As one, the farmers turned to look at Cassandra. She nodded to them. The disbelief on their faces didn't change, but since there was a witness corroborating my story, they weren't quite as secure in their assumptions.

"So what does that mean, if a knight is a slave?" one of the farmers muttered.

Another: "I refuse to be conscripted labor for some slave, getting ordered around while he flaunts his belly piercing!"

A third: "Yeah!"

Not to say that they weren't still pissy.

I suppose they thought I was being uppity and overreaching my station. But given my position at the worksite, I wasn't going to let them treat me like a slave, either. As long as everyone was on the same page, I wouldn't be arrogant *or* servile.

And there's where I made them my offer.

"Think of it like this: Slaves have the lowest status in society, and knights are part of the ruling class that serves the governor. Put the two together, divide by two, and that puts me on the same level as you, right?"

When I laid it out like that, the farmers and even Cassandra stared at me, wide-eyed.

"I gather that you aren't very familiar with who I am, but there you have it. I came to the village several months ago as an outsider. A newcomer. Meaning that I can learn from you, from the experience you all possess. And as your student, I ask only this..."

They waited, uncertain.

"Think of me as the village chief's messenger, passing along her orders. I plan to work alongside you to build this castle. I hope you see where I'm coming from."

I dipped into a crisp bow and the discontented group of farmers were now looking at each other. They had fallen silent. Better than loud and angry, I suppose. This would do until the village chief arrived.

Once I started carrying stone again, this time alongside the new farmers, I saw

Nishka look over at me from where she stood driving the slaves. I guess she'd heard what I said, proud long-ear that she was. After I unloaded the stone from my yoke and headed back down the hill, I saw Nishka marching straight at me. What, did she want to talk?

"Sorry," she said, "I'm goin' for a walk."

"Hey, hold on! You're not skipping out on me, are you?"

"Ha ha ha! Of course not!"

I hastily excused myself from my newly won allies, though I still don't think they exactly liked me, and ran after Nishka.

"How come you didn't slap those idiots down?" she hissed. "Huh?"

"If I start beating people to get them to listen to me, I'm pretty sure the village would ostracize me and my family. And what would I do then?"

"Ostrich size you? I don't get what those birds gotta do with this."

"No, that's not—I mean that they'd snub us. The villagers would all band together to ignore us and we'd be outcasts."

"You talkin' about gettin' bullied?" Nishka snorted. It was weird how infuriated she seemed.

"Where I came from, it was kind of like a rule that, if you crossed all the wrong lines, everyone would ignore you except at a funeral or a fire. I just got a new wife, so I can't afford to start picking fights with anyone."

"I guess you've got a point. But those bastards were bein' so damn rude to you, makes my blood boil!"

"Don't worry about it. Do you think I'll ever be able to get rid of this thing, though?" I tugged on my belly-button piercing and sighed. It drew looks from the villagers, and it was getting to the point that even the stares from the enslaved criminals were starting to bother me.

"Sure ya can. If you don't like it, want me to yank it out for ya?"

"N-no thanks! I like having a belly."

“Ha ha ha! Just jokin’,” Nishka laughed. “But y’know, it doesn’t have to be a joke. The yanking part, sure, but...”

Her face turned serious. I understood why. Even while the two of us were talking, the enslaved criminals were toiling and—every now and again—glancing in our direction with dagger-eyed looks.

“You can handle the farmers however ya want, but that stuff won’t work on slaves. If one of ’em turns rebellious and you don’t set him straight, they’re gonna start gettin’ violent. And if it happens in the village, stuff’d go south real fast.”

“Ugh. That’s true. I should talk to the village chief.”

“And tell her how the farmers were stirrin’ up trouble.”

“You’re right. Speaking of touchy subjects, someone was watching us on our way here this morning.”

“Watchin’ you? Maybe it was the bull-kin.” Nishka propped her chin on her fingers and thought it over.

I didn’t have any guesses of my own, and I didn’t know if it was wise to speculate.

“Ya might not wanna talk about that here, though. Maybe wait until you get back to the village chief’s place.”

“Good point.”

And back to work we went. There were some pockets of unrest in the air, but no one was going to cause problems, at least not yet...but that still left the question of whoever had been stalking us. Who *was* that?

When the village chief arrived that afternoon, she climbed up the hill and then sent her bodyguard, the adventurer Electra, back down before she let slip a whisper of admiration. “Looks like work is progressing pretty well here. I thought it would take more time to get the scaffolding set up.”

“We’ve managed to get a lot done thanks to all the serfs you sent to help.”

“You’ll need to finish as much as possible before autumn. Once harvest time comes around, the farmers won’t be available anymore and the hunters will need to focus their energy on hunting,” Alexandricia told me as we walked the outer boundary of the castle. We had managed to finish the foundation and had begun building scaffolding and setting stones.

I followed along behind Alexandricia, bowing at constant intervals. Cassandra and Elpaco walked even farther back. It was kinda dopey-looking.

“As it happens, I have some good news for you, Shooter.”

“Is it about my new house?”

The village chief turned to me, her eyebrows raised. “Who told you that? I was trying to keep it secret.”

“The carpenters were talking about it. They said that’s why we didn’t have as many carpenters here today.”

“Well, I figured you wouldn’t need so many just to lay foundations and erect scaffolding. Those damn chatty dwarves.”

“Please don’t blame them, ma’am. I was the one who asked if they were overworked, given the shortage of manpower.”

“You notice the strangest things. Or perhaps I know better now—perhaps I should say you seem educated? Regardless, it makes you troublesome. Yes, Shooter, the frame of the house is up and everything is done except the mud walls.”

Right now, houses were being built all over the place for the newly arrived settlers and goblin laborers, and it looked like mine was among them. Then I remembered that basic construction had been done for several buildings on what I’d thought was just the empty lot next to my house. Was I wrong? Was one of them mine?

“Did they really get the entire frame up in one day?”

“Ha. I’m sure your new wives are eager to move in. Once the basics are taken care of, it only takes a day or two to get a one-story house up.”

“Man. Earth magic is something else...”

“It will probably take a few days for the walls to fully set, and we can’t put the thatched roof up until after that.”

“Thank you so much, ma’am. Truly, thank you, from the bottom of my heart.”

I groveled, and Cassandra and Elpaco followed my lead.

“You’d prefer to have a separate room for you and your brides, I assume?”

“Ha ha! Yes, yes yes yes, thank you!”

“It’s much nicer than a hunter’s shack, but it’s still just a wood-frame house with mud walls. I hope you can make do until the proper stone houses are built around the castle,” Alexandricia said cheerfully. Then she drew close beside me and whispered, so that only I’d hear, “I’m working hard for you, big brother.” She smiled. “Well, I’d better get started putting those walls up.”

Hot damn, the walls were coming up, my mood was coming up, *everything* was coming up!

Once we returned home from the worksite that night, I planned to freshen up and then take Tanne d’Arc to the village chief’s manor with us. Usually I’d report on the progress with Nishka or the head carpenter, since they were helping me oversee the site. But today, Alexandricia had made the strange request for me to bring my family instead.

“C-certainly. By family, you mean my two wives?”

“Elpaco lives with you, too, doesn’t he? And that—what do you call it—that little frilled lizard of yours?”

“You want me to bring Basil? But why?”

I squinted suspiciously at the village chief’s command. She always seemed so spontaneous, even if I knew that she was one of the long-game types.

She’d been watching me with amusement that afternoon at the worksite. As I asked her, she coughed slightly and said, “You wound me, my dear elder brother. Now that Gimul is a pledge with the bull-kin, my dinner table feels so empty. Didn’t I tell you to come visit from time to time? So...what do you think?”

“I think you might have another motive,” I replied ambiguously. The village chief really did seem to have something in mind. But whatever little observations I made, I couldn’t exactly refuse her.

When evening came and work was done for the day, we usually trickled back to the village in twos and threes along the well-trodden deer trail. On the way home, I turned to look back at Elpaco, who was at the rear of our group, and asked him something that had been on my mind. “Elpaco?”

“Hm?”

“Do you feel like someone’s watching us again?”

I was referring to the feeling Elpaco had gotten on our way to the worksite at the very beginning of the day, before we’d started work at the lakeshore. Thinking back on it now, I couldn’t help wondering what had been watching us with that nearly tangible malevolence...

But hey, I know karate. You get a sense about these things. Whoever watched us had a reason for doing so. There was no doubt about that.

Slowly but surely, ever since starting my new life in this fantasy world, my intuition was growing sharper.

Humans have a great capacity to adapt to their environment. I remember reading in a book that special forces soldiers honed their minds to the utmost, learning to a kind of “battle-mode sleep.” I guess you could say they were just hypersensitive and only lightly dozing, but a person’s body manages to recover strength even when they only get shallow rest, so it was worth it for these soldiers to learn to sleep pretty much anywhere.

Along those lines, I had learned that Elpaco, being a hunter, was capable of a kind of “hunting-mode sleep.” I suppose caution was only to be expected from a foxling, but he always seemed somehow placid, whether he was conscious or not.

Not that I could do anything like Elpaco or some tactical espionage agent; once I got home to my hunter shack, I flopped down like anyone else and had a pleasant night’s sleep with my family. Or rather, given the fact that every day was brimming with pulled muscles and backbreaking labor, I’d have a pleasant

“passing out the moment I hit bed.”

Especially because it wasn't like I could do any fun, giggly, moany stuff in a one-room shack, whether or not Tanne d'Arc and I were newlyweds.

“There's nothing right now,” said Elpaco, shaking me out of my reverie. “I only felt it that one time.”

“What if it happened before and we just never noticed it?”

“Could've, I guess. This was probably the first time, but if they stayed downwind? I wouldn't know either way.”

“Ugh.”

“Nishka might know better than me.”

At that, an uneasy look came over Cassandra's face. “Do you think it's safe leaving Tanne home by herself?”

“If she stays home, she's got all the villagers nearby to protect her.”

“But the only neighbors who'll have anything to do with us are the other hunter families.”

“You're worried she's being ostracized?”

Tanne d'Arc had been the one to stay home today, but usually she and Cassandra took turns with that. I could see how that could get depressing.

It was true that since Elpaco, Tanne d'Arc, and I had started living in the hunter shack, the neighbors had never once interacted with us. The only people who acknowledged us were Wak'wakgoro and his brothers while I was gone and Gimul when he was poking his nose in.

But the village shunned all the hunters and, as far as I knew, always had. From the villagers' perspective, a family of folk that hunted but regularly failed to bring back any catches were no better than freeloaders.

Well, I *called* it shunning, but then I remembered how almost no villagers had attended the funerals for the first victims of the fight with the wyvern. Back in Japan, that was a no-go. You'd get at least that bare minimum of acknowledgment for a passing, if not the usual respect.

“You’re so accomplished that everyone in the village has to start recognizing you eventually, Shooter,” said Cassandra brightly.

“Yeah, she’s right.”

I felt conflicted letting my wife and puppy-boy bolster my ego like a couple of hype men. I’m not so twisted that praise makes me feel guilty, but once people start expecting things of me, I have to meet their expectations. And I’ve never found that easy.

“I-I guess so. But anyway, let’s focus on giving our report to Alexandricia and coming up with a plan.”

“Um, all right...”

“We don’t want anything to go wrong during construction, and we can’t allow anything to inflame the situation while the settlement is being built.”

“Shooter, you called the village chief by her first name again...”

“Oops...”

I’d let that ambiguous bit of familiarity with the village chief slip out of my inner monologue again. Unable to face Cassandra’s frown, I hurried ahead.

And so we found ourselves at the village chief’s manor.

It was the only abode in town whose construction could compare to those in Bulka. The house that was currently being built for me was nice enough, but it ultimately wasn’t much more than a stretched-out hut.

The village chief’s manor, on the other hand, had a sitting room, a dining hall, and other luxurious rooms in case she needed to welcome any esteemed outsiders.

It had the elegance of a governor’s mansion, buuuuut...well, as the residence of an ambitious woman who was kinda sorta plotting to commit high treason and supplant the kingdom no matter the bloody cost, it was downright puny. Kinda like a flashy celebrity living low-profile, except with the promise of guillotines. (Or, *more* guillotines.)

Tanne d’Arc sighed. “Aren’t you going to knock on the door, husband? The bugs are eating me alive.”

“I’m sure you’re tired, but the village chief is probably waiting for us...”
Cassandra added.

“*Kweee!*”

“R-right. Here goes.”

I had been so caught up in my thoughts gazing at the village chief’s manor that my wives had to prod me back to reality.

Their personalities were so different, it was easy to tell them apart.

Tanne d’Arc, as befitted the sister of a chieftain, never seemed to get enough pampering. Whereas Cassandra, who cradled Basil in her arms, seemed to be happy just to have a family, and she just couldn’t stop complimenting me recently. Probably had something to do with all that time she was alone after her father died.

“You shouldn’t disrespect your husband in public, Tanne.”

“B-but the bugs are making me *itchy*, sister...”

I rapped my knuckles soundly on the door while Cassandra scolded my bull-kin wife. Cassandra had decided to take on the role of a big sister. I guess it almost made sense. I’d married Cassandra first, so she was like a veteran while Tanne d’Arc was more of a newbie. So, sure, why not.

“No excuses, now. Shooter comes from a tribe of great warriors who revere nudity. If you insult your husband, the ancestors of his fallen tribe will come after you.”

“Fiiine.” Tanne d’Arc drooped, but she still took a moment to glance over at me and stick out her tongue.

Cassandra was unexpectedly good at being the primary wife and keeping everything together.

Tanne d’Arc was one thing with her utterly defeated annoyance, but now Elpaco was looking at me with a slightly frightened face, as if asking me to protect him.

“Now, now, Elpaco,” Cassandra cooed, “You’ll only get in Shooter’s way if you’re clinging at his sleeve like that. That wouldn’t be appropriate for one of Shooter’s wives!”

“Wh-wha...*wife*?”

Elpaco looked confused and as usual it was just so friggin’ adorable!

At last, the young serving girl invited us into the village chief’s home.

Basil was the first one through the door, launching himself from Cassandra’s chest.

I ran after him shouting, “Get back here!” The little dork must’ve been hungry. He led me straight to the dining room.

“So, Shooter, you finally decided to show up. And with your whole family, too.”

“I apologize, ma’am. Basil made a mess of things...”

“It’s fine. Now that I don’t have Gimul around anymore, I was thinking of getting a dog. Things like that happen with pets.”

“C’mon, you sound like a mother whose child finally moved out! You’re not that old. Come here, Basil.”

“*Kwee kwee ptthhbb!*”

When I entered the dining room, bowing as I did so, Basil was rubbing against the village chief’s legs. He often did the same to me back in the shack. That chubby little monster! Of course he knew who the scariest person in the whole village was, didn’t he? But he also knew he’d get away with it because he was a baby.

“Wow, Shooter. We’ve been waitin’ so long for ya I already got started with the drinks.”

“Huh? Why did you ask Nishka to come?”

“Aww, don’t be rude, now! My little sister went and got married, so now I’ve got no one to go home to!”

“Oh, really? Why have I never heard about this?”

“You think I’m gonna go around tellin’ everyone my little sister got hitched before me? Way too embarrassin’!”

“I apologize. But is this really the place to talk about it...?”

“Why not? I told the village chief the whole story, and she saw how broken up I was, so she’s probably gonna introduce me to a great guy!” Nishka proclaimed, swinging a bottle of wine, her nose turning red. She was already Topsy Nish, and threatening to get way tipsier.

The servant girl guided the rest of my family in and we took our seats at the long table. The village chief sat at the head, naturally. I sat to her left with Cassandra and Tanne d’Arc, and Nishka and Elpaco sat on the other side.

I bet Topsy Nish was sitting in Gimul’s old seat; the fact that the chair was a little larger than all the others was a good tip-off.

“Now then, shall we eat? Wak’wakgoro brought in a boar today, so he’s prepared some for us. Nice and fresh.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I was just thinking how we ought to go back out hunting every now and then. We’ve dumped all the responsibility on Wak’wakgoro.”

“I’ve already considered that. Once you’ve made a certain amount of progress, I’m thinking you two can take turns as site supervisor.”

“Actually, about that...” I started.

Alexandricia shook her head. “The Scalesplitter told me what happened. Unruly slaves, insubordinate serfs...that’s the situation, is it not?”

“Yes, there’s that. But also one other thing.”

“Yes, yes—someone is watching the village or the nearby area, hmm?” the village chief interrupted. “Let’s discuss why I brought you all here today, seeing as we must inform the bull-kin.”

My entire family gulped. Elpaco alone kept his eyes fixed vacantly on the steaming boar meat.

“Eat while it’s hot,” said the village chief, smirking at the staring Elpaco.

To be completely honest, I'm not a big fan of being teased like that. I didn't really like having dinner dangled in front of me making me salivate, either, but I was more interested in hearing what the village chief wanted to say. I'm not opposed to surprises in and of themselves, but I hate the anxiety of waiting for news you just know isn't going to be good. It's bad for your mental health, you know?

Cassandra and Tanne d'Arc were about as nervous as me, not touching their forks even after the village chief's goblin servant cut off steaming pieces of herbed boar meat and loaded it onto their plates.

Nishka, blunt and easygoing as she was, and hungry Elpaco were the only ones to pick up the strange two-pronged forks of this world. Almost immediately, Cassandra cut in to chide the latter. "No, Elpaco. Neither our husband nor the village chief has started eating yet. You have to wait."

"Oh, okay."

Cassandra was being strict, trying to teach Elpaco manners, but I just smiled and lifted a hand to brush her concern aside. "Oh, it's fine. It's hard to think straight when you're hungry, and we've been toiling the whole day at work."

The village chief watched this exchange, then picked up her fork. "Hm. It's important to take cues from our superiors. Let me begin, then. You too, Shooter."

"Ah, yes. Of course."

Ordinarily, I would've been starving at this point. But I couldn't keep my mind from drifting back to the looming discussion. Still, my family wanted me to take the next bite, so I followed the village chief's example and reached for a steamed potato on one of the dishes at the center of the table.

Steamed potatoes were never missing from any meal in this village, but these were identical to ones that might have been taken from our very own fields. The taste was akin to taro root; it was probably related to the plant that fed regions all around the Pacific.

These were cooked by wrapping the potato in fresh leaves from the plant and setting them in a steam pot. Steaming in the soft, green leaves added a hint of

bitterness and a touch of color to them. When dipped in good boar meat sauce, they were damn good. The faint bitterness and bite of spice paired perfectly with the wine.

“There’s no reason we can’t talk while we eat. I’m told that you’ve sensed someone watching the area around the village.” The village chief brought a cup of wine to her lips and watched my reaction before continuing. “I’ve heard similar reports from the adventurers mapping the area. So I had the matter investigated.”

“Did guild administrator Camulla tell you?”

“No. Electra told me herself.”

Electra was one of the adventurers Nishka and I had interviewed face-to-face at the adventurer’s guild in Bulka, along with Gimul. Very muscular, very hardcore, very gorilla-shaped. She used a rapier, which was pretty odd in this world, so she made quite an impression. I remembered her combat skills being pretty jaw-dropping, too, though I still didn’t know how her preferred weapon performed against monsters.

“Why would she do that?” I asked dubiously.

The village chief’s lips pulled into a smile. “Because she’s someone I can trust, of course.”

Not to mention, Electra was a woman, and I’d seen them together a lot more often recently around the village and at the worksite. Maybe Alexandricia felt more at ease with a woman for a bodyguard, and this one was a particularly skilled warrior at that.

“To all appearances, the adventurer’s guild outpost has started operations. Everything is going smoothly so far.”

“So then why didn’t Camulla mention anything?”

“If you recall, Electra and Dyson were here before him. They took advantage of their familiarity with the area to join the mapping expeditions with the village’s hunters. And, they said they notified the adventurer’s guild of their suspicions that someone might be watching us.”

“Hold on, are you saying that Camulla hid that information?” I nearly dropped my wine cup, and not just because the wine would taste about as good on the floor. This was quite an unexpected development.

“What do you think, Shooter?”

“Well, I can picture a few scenarios. Maybe he didn’t feel like he should escalate unconfirmed information higher up the chain of command. Or maybe Camulla believed the report wasn’t true for his own reasons. Or maybe...” I said finally, “he had reason to ignore it.”

“I see.”

I once worked part-time at a web development company. The company was so greedy, they would take orders from any company for jobs even remotely related to web development. They would do work ranging from a storefront website for a mail order company to subcontracted social network games. The implementation team and development team members always called these companies suckers because the poor saps would bite at anything.

One day I got assigned to manage a project creating background images for a mobile game. My job was to get in touch with the illustrator who was handling the backgrounds and make sure we stuck to the client’s schedule, but the work got delayed for all kinds of reasons.

Maybe the illustrator just wasn’t up to the task, or maybe he had a backlog. There was also the fact that no matter how many pictures we sent the client, they would tell us to make corrections and resend them. In the end, the illustrator started telling me, “I’m almost done!” and then would try anything he could to squeeze out extra time or thwart me.

As they say in business, we had a failure to “report, inform, and consult.” The illustrator was clearly lying and pulling whatever he could to get away with it, sure, but ultimately we reached a stalemate over how to actually fix the problem. First, the picture would get to me late. Then I’d let the general contractor know and add in all kinds of excuses for the delay. Finally, the contractor would make excuses to the publisher. The chain of excuses eventually got so complicated no one could untangle it anymore.

“But no matter his reasons,” I said, “it’s problematic that Camulla didn’t tell us

anything.”

“You think so?”

“Yes.”

I told the village chief exactly what I thought. Ever since I’d arrived in the village, I had decided to stop simply telling everyone what they wanted to hear. And if I owed anyone my true feelings, it was Alexandricia.

I mean, after Cassandra and Tanne d’Arc, of course. They were my wives, and family has to come first. After all, back in Japan, a person like me who went from one part-time job to another could never dream of being able to have a family. I prized them.

“And what do you think, Scalesplitter?”

“Can’t go wrong leavin’ stuff like that up to Shooter. I dunno much about Camulla, but this guy I know I can trust.”

Aw! I love it when Nishka gets nice. At which point Nishka looked over at me, made eye contact, then shut her one eye. Then again, since Nishka wore an eyepatch as a fashion statement, maybe she’d tried for some kinda ironic wink that nobody could see.

“Which means that Camulla is now a person of interest,” I concluded.

“I suppose so.”

“But then we have to ask, why would this barbarian Camulla do something like that?” Elegantly cutting away the last bits of meat still clinging to the bone on her plate, Tanne d’Arc slid into our conversation.

“Easy! He hushed it up ’cause it would make him look bad,” Nishka answered blithely. “He’s probably workin’ with someone. Man, this boar is tasty!”

“And who would that ‘someone’ be? Who would be troubled by things going well for our barbarian chief? I don’t like the sound of this Camulla fellow, husband,” said Tanne d’Arc, scooping the last bits of meat up with her knife and fork. She had some pretty incisive observations, this little sister of the bull-kin chieftain.

“Your second wife is a sharp one, Shooter,” the village chief said, her eyes

wide but intrigued. “As far as my rivals go, there are the governors of the surrounding territories and the earl of Bulka, I suppose. And the earl of Bulka has the most to lose from my success so nearby.”

Tanne d’Arc nodded. “Those parties would be best served by someone infiltrating the settlers. It’s possible that there may be someone among the migrants, the goblin laborers, the enslaved criminals, or the adventurers acting suspiciously.”

“So it’s possible that Camulla is a plant for Bulka’s commander or one of the nearby lords,” I said.

The village chief sniffed. “Obviously we can’t say for certain whether Camulla is directly attached to one of my rivals. He might be linked to a third party acting as a proxy.”

At that, I looked over at Elpaco.

Elpaco paused with a spoonful of vegetable soup to his mouth. He looked so broken up. “D-do you think I’m part of it?”

Of course he got the wrong idea. I wasn’t suspicious of him in the least. It was just that since he was a hunter from Bulka, he had spent a lot of time with the migrants and slaves on the journey to the village. I wondered if he might know something.

I hurried to explain myself. “No, no! That’s not what I meant. I was just wondering if you’d seen any suspicious activity in the newcomers.”

“What do you mean, ‘suspicious activity’?”

“Well, you’re a foxling, right? Those ears of yours can pick up sounds a long way away. And whether it’s because you’re a hunter or because you’re a beastman, you’re good at detecting other people’s movements, right?” I said, trying to patch things up. Elpaco looked a little embarrassed, but was otherwise as unreadable as always.

As soon as I opened my mouth to add something more, Elpaco started to say something, too, and as soon as I *shut* my mouth to hear what he had to say, someone jumped in with their own contribution.

It was Alexandricia.

“You’re a foxling? Shooter—did Elpaco tell you that?”

“Oh, uh, yes. What’s wrong?”

“That girl’s no foxling. Why would you think that?”

“Huh?”

“Um, *boy*?”

“Not important. Who told you that you’re a foxling? I doubt very much that your parents were.”

The village chief was practically interrogating Fuzzball, her tone a little harsher than before. She was leaning forward slightly over the table, staring hard at Elpaco, to all appearances indifferent about whether he was a boy or a girl.

Fuzzball drooped and curled in on himself. He glanced furtively up at me as if begging for help. “I-I was an orphan. A goblin family took me in and raised me as their own. They thought I was a foxling,” Elpaco confessed, almost apologetically.

He was an orphan? And raised by goblins? We really did have no idea what he was, then.

I’d no sooner thought that than a loud knocking resounded through the hall, followed by the sound of ragged breathing. Heavy footsteps pounded over the floor and two adventurers burst into the dining room.

Alexandricia glared. “What’s wrong with you two? We’re in the middle of dinner.”

It was Electra and Dyson.

“We’ve got a problem, ma’am. The sky over the lake has turned red!”

“There’s a fire at the worksite. Someone set the whole place on fire!”

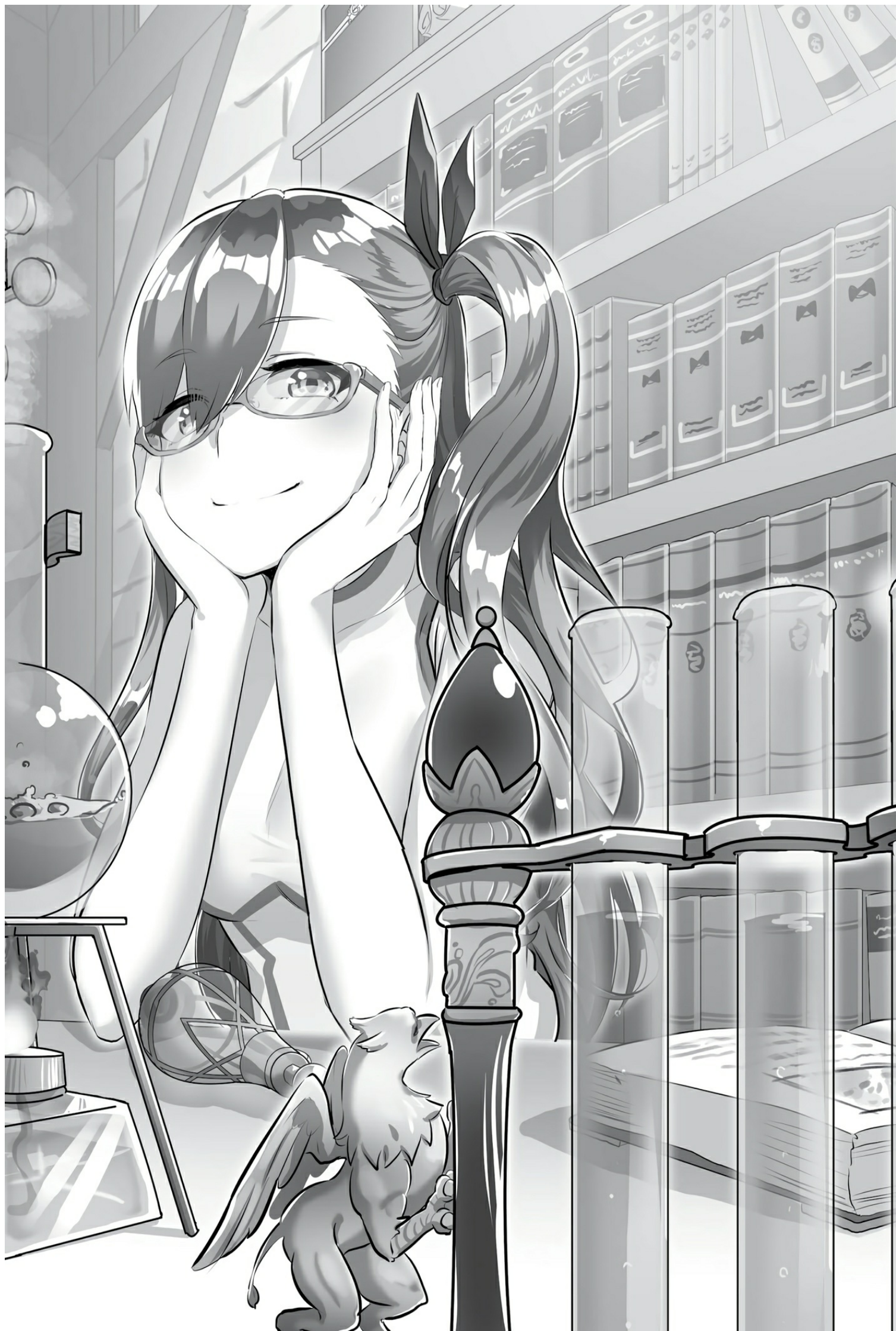
At that, the room burst into a confused uproar.

It felt as if a stack of carefully placed toy blocks had been knocked over.

When I was a kid, I liked to play with blocks when my parents were out. My little sisters would always try to get me to pay attention to them, and sometimes they blew up my block castle to get me to.

I stared at the charred skeleton of the lakeside settlement, reduced to cinders in a single night. Atop the hill, the early stages of the castle were now black with soot. The stones we had stacked were knocked to the ground.

Someone had toppled Alexandricia's toy castle.



Extra Story: Gangi Mari's State of Mind

THE FIRST THING I learned when I arrived in this world was how to use potions.

You load a potion capsule into an applicator and press it against someone. When you do it right, it activates a magic circle carved inside the injector and releases the contents of the capsule. An applicator is one of the simpler magical artifacts. One of the selling points is that even people who aren't skilled at magic can use it pretty easily.

But when I use one, it has a special effect: If someone gets hurt by a curse, I can make the injury fully heal.

Funny, that—in my old world, I was an ordinary schoolgirl, and in this world, I could do something like that out of nowhere. It was a shock, but it made me feel...special.

“What else would you expect from a holy maiden?” they'd say.

Or: “So the Goddess really *did* perform those miracles!”

Praise and praise and praise, until I started getting caught up in the hype myself.

The next thing I learned was how to fight. Healing cursed wounds is fine, I suppose, but this new world was not a kind one.

Monsters could appear anywhere, even inside the cathedral at Bulka. If you set one foot outside the town, you run straight into bandits and outlaws. If you don't know how to protect yourself, you might just be biding your time before they kill you.

I decided to undergo the military training of holy warriors. I wanted to become an apprentice Templar of the Order, but I didn't expect the training to be so hellish. It was worse than I could've imagined. To think, the only point of comparison I could draw on at the time was P.E. in junior high and high school. It was ten times more grueling and dangerous. No one actually died, but we

were animals to the instructors. Several of my fellow initiates just ran off.

“The lot of you are a pack of apemen! You’re no better than the infidels, undeserving of the Goddess’s favor!”

The captain was a Templar. I’d thought she was a kind woman, but when training started, the mask dropped. She showed us no mercy. She didn’t care if the initiates were children of the nobility or related to great merchant households. How egalitarian.

Even I, recognized by the Order of Templars as a holy maiden, was another piece of meat to hammer into steel. She drove me just as hard as the rest, until I felt like I was going to puke up my own guts.

“What kind of divine protector are you, girl?! Or are you just a naked harlot someone dumped in the cathedral?!”

I thought I remembered watching a movie where a new army recruit got hazed like this, drilling day in and day out. “This is my rifle, there are many like it...”

But this was real life, and a harder world. They forced me to use my divine healing magic on the other initiates and then pushed us even harder.

It took a while, but this regular high school student shed that label. She acquired the physique and skills to fight as a Templar.

Next, I learned the art of magic.

Templars in the Order drill to train in divine healing magic. Once that was out of the way, I had the opportunity to study beginner-level magic.

I didn’t have the first clue about magic when I started. As far as I know, we don’t have anything like that in our world. I lagged behind the others in my class. But in the end, when Yoi came to the Order to study magic, she was kind enough to give me special education in the magical arts. Somehow, I managed to learn a small set of spells.

“This is the first time I’ve ever seen someone learn magic and do it right the very first time!” Yoi said.

This world was pretty inconvenient—no electricity, no plumbing—but now

magic would make things like boiling water and drying the laundry easier. Between that and my divine healing magic, I ended up better than anyone else in my class. I could heal any injury, any disease.

I learned a lot more than that, but the most troublesome subjects were probably reading and writing. After all, it's impossible to really study if you can't read. But I was determined to escape this cruel world, so I avidly studied all of it. Maybe then I'd learn something, anything useful from old texts. A way out.

Later on, when I came to terms with spending the rest of my life here, I had to learn the customs of this world. The behavior of a gentleman. The particular flavor of "Proper Lady" imposed in this culture. These people were even more stratified than mine—in addition to average citizens, we had royalty, nobility, and slaves, and each social class cultivated their own subclasses and particular etiquette. I sought out every one of those rules. The holy maiden could not embarrass herself.

A Tired Nobody to the Holy Maiden: "You saved my son's life, your holiness! Truly, I cannot thank you enough!"

The Glorious Maiden to her Overworked Follower: "You should save your thanks for the Goddess, not me. The Goddess does not abandon those with faith in their hearts."

"Thank you," he *et cetera et cetera*'d. "You are the Goddess reborn in the flesh!"

If I acted pompous when people thanked me, it would only disillusion the Goddess's followers. Every time I used my healing magic, I told people that they had been saved by the Goddess's compassion.

That was the idea, anyway...

"What you're doing, Mari, is what they call 'sending mixed signals.'"

"Wh-what do you mean? I'm not trying to be that way," I would insist.

Or I might say something like: "Nothing's forcing them to thank me! I'm just

doing my duty as a saint of the Goddess!”

Today, it was: “Are you making fun of me?”

“Huh? Far from it! We’re comrades, aren’t we? United against violence!” A naked man with a sly grin stood before me, dust cloth in hand. He had a teasing manner.

“Shut up. A slave teasing someone like me is a crime!”

I threw the bundle of papers in my hand and was gratified to see them hit the naked man square in the face. I suppose I had learned how to use thrown weapons in my military training. Seeing the look on his punchable little face made it all worth it.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I simpered. “Do you want me to call an ambulance for those deadly sheets of paper?”

“It was a papercut to the heart. My own comrade, betraying me...!”

“Why are you like this?!”

We were in the mansion I shared with Yoi within the walled town of Bulka. We had a large drawing room, bedroom, library, and workshop. There was also a spacious dining room and a parlor, both of which I kept ready for any high-ranking guests I needed to schmooze. But it was probably a little big for just me and Yoi.

“Is it my lot to suffer in life, now that I’m your slave?” he moped.

I answered the question he was actually asking. “When I bought this mansion, we were still adventurers going out on jobs. We managed to afford this place by pooling our money, but never had enough to hire a servant.”

“So how did you keep the place clean before I got here?”

“At first, Yoi and I took care of it. Later on, some friends helped out.”

“Friends? Do you mean people from the Order of Templars?” he asked as he handed my papers back to me.

This was Shooter, the BuckNaked Dweeb. My partner, Yoi, bought him for eighteen gold pieces. He asked me all kinds of questions as he polished the floor

of the workshop Yoi and I shared. He was like me: some stranger from another world. I guess that's why he was so interested in learning what I went through when I first came to this one.

"That's right," I said. "After I came to this world, I shared a room at the Order with them for a while. I've known them a long time."

"I'm jealous. I shared a room with chickens."

"You got spit out in the forest. That's just bad luck, nothing more," I said, offering words of sympathy.

He let out a long sigh, clearly agreeing with my assessment, and returned to polishing the floor. "But now you have enough money to hire a servant, right? So why haven't you?"

"We had a goblin manservant come two or three times a month. But we're always out on adventures and the mansion is empty a lot, so it doesn't really get all that dirty."

"Oh?"

"We started cleaning it ourselves recently, because we were going to buy a slave that would be useful in attacking a dungeon."

"I wouldn't call having a slave do your cleaning 'doing it yourselves'..."

"I'm cleaning, too, aren't I?!" I shot back at the slave. Yoi had bought such a complainer.

"Oh really? You haven't lifted a finger this whole time we've been talking, have you?" he pointed out.

"Hmph." I realized he was right. I'd been so focused on stories of my past that I completely stopped cleaning up the equipment for my experiments.

This world had people called patron saints of the Goddess. Thirteen people had been recognized as saints in the past, and now I was the illustrious fourteenth. They called us patron saints, apostles, and all kinds of other titles. And if the scriptures and texts were true...every single one of us was transported from another world. Buck. Naked.

Depending on their powers, the saints protected believers from violent threats or enriched the land with their discoveries. They were fonts of knowledge—sages, you might say. Following in their footsteps, I was the greatest known practitioner of divine healing magic. Even if a person lost a limb, I could restore it perfectly. It took a high level of skill in healing to do that, so they said, and I didn't know of anyone else on the frontier who could manage it.

As long as a person still had the will to live, I could restore them to health, even from critical condition. It's a bit interesting to live a life where you can cut through cancer with a thought.

The trade-off was that the rest of my abilities were completely average. Compared to Yoi, I was nothing special at all with elemental magic, and combat? Shooter was way, way better than me in that department. No doubt if he had been taken in by the Order of Templars, he would have been recognized as a patron saint, too.

I wonder what his holy power would have been.

But he had left a wife back in a village on the outskirts of Apegut and now he was enslaved. With this world's prejudices, I wondered if he would ever be recognized as a saint now. Shooter was planning to go back to his village with his partner Nishka soon, and...come now, obviously running into this man was a complete coincidence, not the will of the Goddess, right?

Then again, what if Yoi hadn't bought him from the slave traders? I probably would have never met Shooter, another stranger from another world. A person from Japan. From home.

I don't know if the Goddess really exists. The ancient texts say that people really have received divine revelations, but I've never experienced that. The Goddess's followers believe that my divine healing magic is proof of her existence. If afflictions that are normally incurable are healed by my hands, against all the rules of nature, then...

Well. I once asked the archbishop of Bulka's cathedral: "Have you ever personally felt the presence of the Goddess?"

"Ha. An interesting question." He folded his hands contemplatively. "Perhaps my faith or practice is lacking, because I might claim to have felt it or claim to

have never felt it and both statements would be true.”

The archbishop was in the third tier of ranks within the Order of Templars. I was in the second tier, but that was only because I was a holy maiden. He was much hungrier for trials and meritorious deeds than me.

“What does that mean? Is that some kind of koan?”

“A...cone? A...round pyramid? No, it’s...I’m sorry, I’m a little confused.”

I knew from the holy texts that pretty much none of the thirteen previous apostles had actually experienced the presence of the Goddess. Oh, but she was “present in the hearts of her followers.” It’s always that, isn’t it?

I suppose the one concrete difference from the world we came from was that here, people definitely witnessed “miracles from the Goddess” in person. But, well, the miracles only occurred to priests of the various holy orders who worshipped her, so maybe it was linked to how strongly a person believed.

I was cooking in the kitchen while Shooter stood behind me, once again pestering me with questions.

“But if someone loses their entire arm, there’s no way you can fix that, right?” he asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous. If someone gets hurt and loses their arm, it might take several years, but it’s easy enough to grow it back.”

“‘Grow it back’? What a way to phrase it...”

Yoi had bought him to be a slave, but I insisted on doing the cooking. The girl was a genius—by the time she was five years old, she had acquired knowledge and developed magic to rival any adult—but she had no idea how to cook. Being raised in a noble family, servants had always cooked for her.

When I’d been a carefree high school student, I was able to use a rice cooker and make some simple meals, but that was it. Shooter, meanwhile, had lived on his own, floating from one job to another. I wondered if that meant he actually might be good at cooking.

“Would you like me to chop your head off and see whether my magic can

bring you back to life?" I asked.

Shooter winced and took a couple steps back. "Hey, that's not as funny as you think when you're holding a knife."

"I'm not even pointing it at you. Don't freak out." I paused. "But I've never actually tried doing that, come to think of it..."

"W-well, of course not! Just, please, keep your experiments limited to animals, if you don't mind."

I once read a medical text about divine healing magic that included a method for resurrecting the dead. No records remained of anyone actually doing it, and apparently experiments on dead animals had never been very successful. Even with access to the Goddess's miracles, I probably wouldn't be able to pull it off.

This fantasy world was not kind. You had to value your own life.

"My healing magic isn't all-powerful, you know," I blurted out. Ugh, *why*.

"I guess not. If all-powerful magic existed, anyone who used it would basically be a god." Shooter gave me a long look. No trace of the sardonic. It was...gentle. "Have you ever not been able to save someone?"

"Once. Twice. Maybe a few more."

Shooter nodded silently.

Even if those people had lived, my magic wouldn't have been able to heal the wounds in their hearts. Magic could've helped. It still wouldn't have been enough.

Shooter laid a hand on my shoulder as I cooked, moving robotically. You can shake off memories with movement. I say that to myself sometimes. He looked at me silently.

"Wh-what?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking, you must have been through so much, Mari."

That knowing, punchable look on his face...

"Could I be alone for a little while?" I muttered.

"Yep. Just call me when the food is ready. I'll go fold laundry in the

meantime.”

“All right.”

He smiled at me as if nothing unusual had happened and went out to the living room.

At first, I didn't trust this slave named “Yoshida Shuta” that Yoi had bought. His smile was flippant and his manner was that of a slacker, a cheat, a trickster. And sure, I could tell right away that he was Japanese. But knowing that just made things worse.

By the standards of the Order of Templars, he would have been one of the patron saints. Doctrine teaches that someone transported from the realm of the Goddess is able to embody miraculous powers.

Yes, he knew karate and yes, he was an accomplished martial artist, but that's hardly a miraculous power from the Goddess. I wondered if maybe just being from a different world wasn't enough. Perhaps you had to get dropped somewhere with a religious affiliation to be granted the powers of a patron saint. Which would mean Shooter was just a regular person.

But if that were true...I'd learned a lot since being flung into this cruel fantasy world, and yet it still enraged me to hear him talking about how he had just gotten married, how he'd performed feat after feat of incredible combat.

I don't know when I changed my mind about him.

When he challenged me in the middle of our camp in the dungeon, I still expected him to get violent with me, like a giant apeman.

“Let's make a bet: if I lose, I'll do anything you say from now on, and I won't ask to be treated as your equal. I'll be your slave along with Miss Yoi's.”

I took the bait because I was overconfident. I had the miraculous power of the Goddess behind me. I had undergone the training of a holy warrior and become a Templar. After all the work I had done, I didn't believe I could lose. I didn't bother to picture what might happen if Shooter won.

But then, I lost.

I waited, heart pounding, to hear what he would demand of me.

“We’re equals from now on,” he said. “Two members of the same party. Sound good?”

He never demanded anything else.

At the time, I couldn’t imagine what was going through his mind to make him ask such a thing. So when I asked him what he was planning to do, I didn’t expect his answer.

“The last-ditch option human beings have is communication. The more we learn about each other, the stronger the bonds between us become.”

“You’re not making any sense.” Why did he always wear that dopey smile of his, even as Yoi ordered him around as her slave? Even then?

His attitude never failed to irk me, and yet there was no one more dependable when battle erupted.

Back in that crumbling dungeon, when we faced off against the basilisk that appeared out of nowhere, he leapt into battle so calmly, without even a thought of surrender. He said he had fought a wyvern, so maybe Shooter had been through more than I thought. Bit by bit, I started to look at him differently.

In that moment, there was barely enough time for him to toss me a spare weapon. But he did, and it saved my life.

“You’re amazing! I really got lucky when I bought you!” Yoi gushed. She was a short distance away, but she was so overjoyed. That didn’t sit well with me, either.

And yet, through the anger and distrust, I suppose deep down I was actually grateful. Alone, Yoi and I probably wouldn’t have been able to take down the basilisk. And yet the words “thank you” were so difficult to say.

“Huh? What’s wrong, Mari? Is there something on my face?”

“I-It’s nothing,” I snarled. “I just can’t stand that stupid look on your face!”

“Well, that’s not a very nice thing to say. I was born this way!”

I had insulted him for no reason, but Shooter just replied with a laugh.

Even at that moment, I had trouble trusting him. He patted Yoi on the head and moved deeper into the dungeon. As I watched him walk away, I took a deep breath and thought of one thing I could thank him for.

“I-It was pretty useful having a warrior for a slave back there,” I muttered. “I j-just wanted to say thanks.”

“Well, of course. We’re all one party, after all!”

There was nothing endearing in what I said, but Shooter played it off jokingly. Like it was all in good fun, like he was on everybody’s side. So irritating. Why did it make me smile?

Ah. That was probably when it happened, when I revised my opinion of Shooter and started to trust him.

I hadn’t understood what he meant by “the last-ditch option human beings have available to them is communication.” But I *did* know what “the more we learn about each other, the stronger the bonds between us become” meant.

When I went through the holy warrior training, the other initiates and I fought with each other constantly. We were completely out of sync. But as we went through training exercises again and again and again, we began to consider one another as allies. Even the infuriating ones, and there were many. I could tell stories.

Once we decided to stop insisting on getting our own way, things became easier.

I considered that idea, remembered that moment, and understood a little. Shooter’s flippant little smile was his unique way of building bridges.

So fine. I’ll admit it. I dropped my guard a little.

Once we finished hunting the first basilisk, I asked my partner, in passing, what she thought of this man. This was when we were getting ready for the rematch and inspecting our adventuring equipment.

“I think Mr. Slave was a real bargain!”

“Hm. Is that so?”

“He’s so big and strong, and I know he’s kind of gross because all he does is stare at your big ol’ bottom, but he sure does come in handy.”

That was how Yoi saw him. I knew that he was always ogling me, but I hadn’t realized he was checking out my butt. Ugh, just as I was starting to relax my guard, I had to deal with *that*.

“You make me sick!” I snapped once. “You can’t use magic, you can’t even read, and now you choose to show off that gross—guh, that *thing* in front of us! What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong with me. It’s a natural biological function. I can’t do anything about it. Unless you’re, uh, offering to help me let off some steam? Heh.”

“How about you die?! Hell always needs some steam!” Ugh, if Shooter liked butts so much, how about he grope his own?

I kicked him—hard—and Shooter yelped like a confused little puppy.

I glared at him, looked for a familiar anger, and...didn’t feel it as much as I used to, even though I’d let my guard down and he’d responded by being a huge, dumb *ass*. I ended up feeling even more fed up with his shit.

Unfortunately, Yoi saw the whole thing. Then she *asked* me about it. “Did something happen, Ganjamary?”

“N-no, nothing happened! Don’t worry about it!”

“That’s the truth?”

“Nothing happened, really...” I muttered. “But see, that’s the problem. I was ready for him to do something to me, but *nothing* happened.” He wasn’t who I thought he was. I didn’t know what to do with that.

And he’d wagered that if we dueled and he lost, he would obey us without question. I couldn’t tell Yoi that he had made that promise and then we’d fought each other while she was asleep. That was why my hasty explanation confused her. She cocked her head to one side curiously.

“I thought he was the just the worst kind of guy, and I was going to treat him that way... but then he has the nerve to be nice! Ugh, now I don’t know what to

think!”

Yoi looked confused, but she kept coming after me with shrewd questions. “Tell me—do you like him or hate him?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. He’s a slave! You can’t like a slave and you can’t hate a slave, so...neither! I’ll admit he’s a bit more of a gentleman than I thought, but he put the bar so low already. I mean, he’s buck naked!”

Even I didn’t really understand what I was trying to say.

Wouldn’t a naked gentleman just be a degenerate? His parts stuck straight out in the morning and he was always checking out girls’ butts...but ...

A wry smile crept over my lips as I explained the problem to my tiny partner, choosing my words carefully.

But then all of a sudden, Yoi beamed brightly as if she’d just had a realization. “I’m so glad you and Mr. Slave learned to get along! I didn’t even notice. I hope the three of us can keep on adventuring together! I’m smart, so I know that if you two get married, we can stay together forever!”

Argh. Okay, she was a kid, and kids say all kinds of stuff, but did she really need to say something like that?

She was pointing at her slave’s butt, grinning as if she’d had the most wonderful idea ever.

I quickly covered Yoi’s mouth with one hand and quietly hissed, “He’s got a wife back home in the sticks. That is *never* going to happen...got it?”

“Mmph—but, Ganjamy! I thought the law says he can have as many wives as he wants.”

“That’s not the issue here! The more wives someone has, the more tax they have to pay too! How is a slave like him going to pay taxes?”

“You could pay the taxes for him.”

In the midst of this ridiculous discussion, Shooter turned around with a curious look on his face.

Oh no, how much had he heard?

At least Nishka the Scalesplitter wasn't there with us. She was from a tribe of long-eared steppe barbarians and a hunter to boot, so her ears would have been keen enough to catch everything.

But looking at Shooter, I was pretty sure he hadn't heard us. He had the same goofy expression as ever and an empty-headed grin, so maybe everything was fine.

He'd only been in this new world a few months and had already landed himself a wife, so who knew—if he overheard us, he might get overconfident and try to propose to me.

I figured I should give him a good, angry kick just in case. "What're you lookin' at?! You want another one?!"

"Yeowch! No, one was enough! Please, save me, Miss Yoi!"

That was the man who returned with Nishka to their village in Apegut Forest, leading a caravan of settlers. Yoi was sad to see them go, but she still agreed to Shooter's suggestion to work as adventurers in his village.

Once we took care of our prior obligation in town, we could sell the mansion and head out to the settlement in Apegut. But first we had to deal with the issue before us.

"So that group of ogres came from the north?" I asked. I sat in my workshop, brightly lit by sunlight coming through the window.

A Templar woman sat in a guest chair beside the window, watching me as she replied. "That was the conclusion reached by the joint investigation between the Order of Templars and the adventurer's guild, anyway. Here's the report."

"Thanks, Pyne."

Her name was Robart-Pynelyne. She was the woman who'd been my roommate in all the stories I told Shooter. Her cheerful smile never left her face, but she was the most formidable lance wielder in the Order of Templars. Those of us who worked with her fondly referred to her as "Pyne."

I accepted the papers from her and Pyne continued. "As of right now, we have

about two thousand decapitated ogre heads total. This is without question the greatest onslaught in recent memory. The experts suspect this is more than a few small tribes filtering down from the north. They believe that something has caused a mass migration.”

“Something causing a mass migration...” I echoed, rifling through the stack of papers.

When we encountered the ogres on our way to hunt the basilisks, we thought they were related to the appearance of those basilisks. But as far as I could tell from scanning the report, something else was driving the ogres to start moving in such large numbers.

“Colonel Cleef,” I said. “What are his thoughts?”

“He wants us to keep working with the adventurer’s guild to find out exactly what’s causing this. If there’s something in the northlands scaring the ogres away, they might start moving in even greater numbers. And if that happens, the Order will have to send out an expeditionary force.”

I raised my eyes from the report to give Pyne a long, careful look. If the Order did form an expeditionary force, the Templars scattered throughout the lands would gather in Bulka and be sent forth. Considering what was at stake, the expression on her face was oddly placid.

Pyne spread out the map she’d brought with her. She pointed at the villages along the northern border, her finger jumping like a skipping stone from one to the next. “The Bulka adventurer’s guild has dispatched search parties to villages here, here, and over here. But as of now, we haven’t received any follow-up reports of new ogre incursions.”

“There are no immediate plans to send a large expedition north, then.”

“That’s right. You’re looking pretty calm, though. No plans any time soon, Ganjamary?”

“I have something in the works. But if they do end up sending an expedition, maybe I should let him know...” I mumbled, lost in thought.

Pyne was a keen listener, though. She perked up and craned her neck toward me. “Ah, is that the matter you reported to Colonel Cleef? You and little Yoi

planning to move to the Apegut settlement in the next few days?”

“S-so what if we are? Scrape that look off your face, would you?”

She snorted. “I look the way I always look.”

“Then *look*: he’s from the same world as me. As a member of the Order of Templars, I should keep him under watch. It’s part of my duty as holy maiden. Do you have a problem with that?”

“Oh no, no problem at all.”

The more I tried to justify it, the more it felt like Pyne was misunderstanding me. Her smile kept getting bigger and goofier, and since I already felt incredibly awkward, I just drooped my head in embarrassment. Nothing I said could convince her. Come on, hardly anyone in the Order got involved in love affairs. Any other Templar would have reacted the same way!

Pyne looked down at the map and once she located the Apegut settlement, I saw understanding dawn on her face.

“Ah, I see. So that’s where Apegut village is. If this gentleman *was* led to this world by the Goddess’s intervention like you were, he would also be a patron saint. We shouldn’t lose track of him.”

She had seen Shooter when we exposed the nefarious slave trader Lutbayasky Nupchsay Nupchakan, so she was at least somewhat familiar with him.

“Are you recommending that he be brought to the Order of Templars?” Pyne asked.

“Not yet.”

“Ha! Too bad! Once Colonel Cleef hears about this, I’ve no doubt he’ll want us to bring the gentleman in and put him under our protection!”

“No, Shooter has a family in Apegut. The colonel wouldn’t get very far trying to convince him to leave.” Still, hearing someone else say that the slave Yoi had bought completely randomly was actually a patron saint struck me as funnier than I’d expected. I broke into a huge smile.

“Heh.”

“What’s up, Ganjamary?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Ahem!” I regained my composure and looked back at Pyne. She straightened up. “I’ll send a report to Colonel Cleef in the next few days. The man is a newlywed. He’s finally been released from Yoi’s service and gone back to his village. I don’t feel right calling him back here so soon.”

“In that case, there’s no need to discuss the matter any further.” And just like that, Pyne backed off. Not that she wasn’t still smiling. “You’re going to Apegut to become his second wife, aren’t you? You don’t want me to concern myself with it because you’re going to, uh, ‘teach’ him about patron saints and ‘take him into the fold’ yourself. I see!” She was very, very good at winking. Maybe it was the dimples.

“Why would I do that? Of course that’s not my plan!”

“I’ll drop the hint to Colonel Cleef. I toooooootally get it!”

“You don’t get it at all, actually! Hold on!” First Yoi saying this kinda stuff, and now her. Yoi had an excuse, at least—she was just a kid!

Pyne left my workshop, giving me one last meaningful look. I watched her go. The only sound in the room was the potion reagent I was studying, bubbling away in its flask.

I was totally deflated, at a loss for words at the sudden turn our conversation had taken.

Shooter must’ve been just getting back to his village about now, joyfully reuniting with his wife. I had thoughts on the situation. A lot of them hinged on how there were only a scant few of us who’d been transported here from the same world.

I...would pray to the Goddess for him, that he could spend at least a few more days in peace in this cruel world.

“I pray that he be granted happiness...”

Murmuring this prayer in a low voice, I leaned on my worktable, propping my chin in my hands, and watched my potion brew.

Extra-Extra Story:

Electra's Diary

Entry 2

APEGUT VILLAGE is even more desolate than I expected.

The village chief Alexandricia, governor of the area, is a woman who clearly came up through the ranks of the military. She looks like a noble. And, well... that's it. The village is nothing but potato fields as far as the eye can see, dotted with villagers out working them. Scatter in herders caring for pigs or sheep and some goblin woodcutters. They told me the settlements in Apegut got attacked by wyverns all the time, but I was starting to find that hard to believe.

"I know that look. You're surprised at how gutted the village appears," the village chief said, looking me up and down, taking the measure of me.

Apparently she'd overheard me discussing my read of the place: that the village was more of an undeveloped backwater than I could've even imagined.

"Ah, I thought the village seemed like a nice place to live."

"I was just thinking how lucky I am to be able to help out here, too," Dyson chimed in.

We scrambled to snap to attention, but it was too late. We shouldn't have said anything.

The village chief lowered herself leisurely into her chair and gazed imperiously at us. The look on her face was terrifying. "I commend you on your keen observations. This village is indeed a backwater at the outer reaches of the kingdom. Our land bears potatoes, lumber, furs, wyverns, and nothing more. You were invited here with the intention of hunting the last."

The village chief punctuated this by rising to her feet and gazing up at the stuffed wyvern head that adorned the back wall of her office and, at last, she told us that story.

The way Gimul described it, six hunters lost their lives to a wyvern who

launched an assault on the village back in the spring, and the adventurers who came from town had been less than useless. In the end, that buck-naked guy Shooter and long-eared Nishka put a stop to it, but the village must have taken heavy losses before it was all over.

“Y-you can rely on us,” Dyson butted in. “If there’s one thing I’m confident in, it’s my strength. I’ll cleave right through a wyvern’s neck with my trusty broadax! You with me, Electra?”

“Y-yeah! I am but a lowly adventurer. I owe you a great debt for taking me on. I will gladly be your shield and sword to protect you at all costs!”

Dyson fumbled his lines in his rush to sell himself to the village chief. Then he glanced at me, begging me to say something too, and I totally flubbed it too. If I let it slip that I’d only come to the village looking for a steady job and a nice guy to marry, I wouldn’t blame the village chief for striking me down right then and there. She was a noble lady who had served in the military, after all.

“Ah ha ha! After such glorious introductions, I’m sorry to say that for the time being, the only work I can offer you is to serve as my bodyguard.”

“Your bodyguard...?”

“That’s right.” The village chief grinned and took a step toward us. She clapped her hands on our shoulders. “There are quite a few in the village who know how to handle a weapon. I want you to go where I go and just act like you’re watching my back.”

We were bewildered. Here I was, worried that she expected me to be a meat shield for her against a wyvern. Deep down, I’d been scolding myself for naïve my dreams of marriage.

After offering that glimpse of her trust in us, the village chief started talking about Shooter, and bubbled over with a girlish laugh. “You can leave the wyvern to our naked warrior. I have other plans for you two.”

Dyson and I looked at each other and whispered, “What does that mean?”

The village had about five warriors total.

First there was me—and I had a bit of confidence in my personal combat skills. The rest were men, headed up by the village chief's stepson, Gimul. All the rest were total amateurs, even if they did carry swords.

"When you say warriors...you mean these men?" I asked Gimul.

"That's right."

"Have they been through serious training here in the village?"

"Nope."

"And you want me to teach them how to use a sword?"

"Yes."

"There aren't a few heartier men among the farmers?"

"No."

"I actually think hunters, or maybe people used to doing odd jobs, could be honed into decent warriors."

"No."

This goddamn guy. No matter how carefully I worded my suggestions, I received flat, one-word answers.

The young men gathered there were all the sons of wealthy families in the village, and since they'd been born to riches, they were utterly incapable of actual farm work. They were warriors in name only. No guts, no physical strength. But they were part of the village leadership, so these scrawny, primping nobles were allowed to carry swords.

Gimul was more solidly built than most people, but he relied on his brute strength to wield a sword. Even he didn't compare to the military-trained village chief.

I did my best.

"Why don't you move the way I tell you to, worms? You have to throw your entire body at these straw dummies if you ever want to hit someone with your sword! I told you, you can't just flail your arms around!"

Since they were rank amateurs, I had to start by teaching them how to hold

their swords and do practice swings. I thought they were getting used to handling their weapons, but then they started timidly jabbing at the straw dummies. Not a single one of them managed to land a solid blow. Not *one*.

I was speechless.

I kept working with them, but I couldn't help wondering if Shooter had really come from this village. If the villagers had gotten training from him, I would have expected at least some of them to be better at handling a sword.

"You're talking about Shooter?" one of them panted. "We found him wandering around the forest. He was lost. He's actually the descendant of a tribe that glorifies nudity. He only got here recently."

"I see. So as strong as Shooter is, he hasn't had any time to teach these worthless rich boys."

"Right."

"Are you lumping me in with the worthless rich boys?" Gimul muttered.

I ignored him. I was following the village chief's orders to provide warrior training, but I had absolutely no idea when these guys would ever become serviceable.

They were young, and all were the sons of wealthy farmers, so I might have considered them as husbands, but not a single one of them appealed to me.

Dyson didn't have as much personal combat experience as I did, so he was in charge of the physical-fitness training side of things. But we alternated teaching days with bodyguard duty, and today was his day.

To be perfectly honest, I think being in charge of the bodybuilding training was easier. The types of people who want to be adventurers or mercenaries have specific goals in mind, like getting rich or making a name for themselves, and that makes them dedicated. But this group of guys could be haughty decision-makers in the village without having to lift a finger. In a few years, they would simply hand the role of warrior off to some other kids. I didn't know what the village chief was thinking by providing physical training and making them learn to use a sword, but at least it was a way to kill time.

Shooter could've taken on all these guys at once and still beat them.

One day I caught sight of sunlight reflecting off a bald head and realized Dyson was approaching. He was so huge that I could see him even far away. He was escorting the village chief to come check on us.

"Looks like you're doing good things here, Electra," she observed.

"Thank you, ma'am. As you ordered, I'm teaching them how to handle a sword, but I'm not sure they're actually learning anything. They're as weak-kneed as ever and they still get out of breath taking just one lap around the pasture."

I'd established myself in the village well enough to feel comfortable talking this way to the village chief. But when she sent Dyson on to inspect the clay mine and forge, he moved away behind her then covertly shot me a resigned look, as if to say that it was no use to complain.

"That's good enough. As long as they can put on a show. The villagers are watching, after all. Since we live out on the frontier, we need to take in immigrants from time to time. That can lead to some disagreements between the old and new residents, so it's a good idea for these boys to learn a little swordplay."

"How have you handled things up 'til now?"

"I've been able to lead a village this size well enough on my own. There was an epidemic here ten years ago, so we weren't able to attract many new settlers at that time. We focused on managing the territory instead. It takes money to expand territory, and we didn't have the resources to take people in. But now, we're growing."

"Ah, I see."

"Here, let me see one of those swords," the village chief said with a smile. She drew closer and snatched up a sword from one of the young village elites, who had been driven to his knees in one of the exercises. She stepped smoothly over to stand before one of the straw dummies.

"Now watch closely, boys. This is how you use a sword!"

No sooner had the words left her mouth than the village chief swung herself into a wide-legged stance and instantly lunged forward despite the dress she wore, her body taut with power. Her fluid movements were as magnificent as you would expect from a woman trained in the king's army. She slashed the target, then rapidly pulled the sword back and jabbed out again with a quick follow-up.

She sliced right through the straw dummy's abdomen, so she had to thrust the sword back through the top half of the dummy as it tumbled toward the ground.

Dyson and I just gaped for a moment. Then we lavished our admiration on her as she withdrew her sword.

"Whoaaa! You're amazing, ma'am!"

"You're much better with a sword than me!"

"What, that? Ha! That was nothing."

The village's warriors were useless and timid, but this wasn't just any remote outpost on the borderlands! They had Shooter, they had Nishka, and they had... her. Hot damn.

"I haven't practiced in a long time," she mused. "I suppose it was all right. I'm better with a spear, but of course, I sold off the magic spear the king awarded me." The village chief said it quite casually, but that was anything but expected.

The village chief turned and walked away from us. Once she'd left, one of the young elites said, "Our village chief is something else."

That set Gimul to bragging about her. "Would you expect anything less? If you ever oppose my stepmother, she'll do what she did to that dummy to you."

I no longer understood why the village chief had ordered me to play at being a soldier like this. Some piece of the puzzle was missing. Maybe...did she want to kick up a war with the neighboring villages?

A while after Shooter got back to the village, the village chief put a stop to the

warrior lessons she had ordered. “There’s no point any longer.”

This was a little after we sighted the tribe of bull-kin by the lake in the woods. Wak’wakwhatever, the goblin leader of the hunters, and I were scouting the area when we found their footprints.

The village chief ordered Shooter and Nishka to sneak in and assess the bull-kin colony, but they were far more culturally advanced than we assumed. Suddenly, we were on the brink of war.

Diplomacy looked like it was going to be tough, but then the illustrious folks on both sides reached a decision peacefully. The minotaurs agreed to become vassals of the village chief, so she didn’t need her diaper-bound rich-kid warriors anymore.

“Besides, training these little snots is hopeless. We’ve got a good number of adventurers together now to balance them out, so I decided to let the kids off the hook. Now that we can mobilize bull-kin soldiers, it would be foolish not to use them.”

“I agree, that’s an excellent idea. Since Shooter has been appointed to a knighthood, he can take care of the rest.”

Speaking of unsuccessful ideas, just look at me considering Shooter a good prospect for a future marriage, ha. I mean, Shooter had his young wife Cassandra and also had a new bull-kin bride in Tanne d’Arc, not to mention the lovely young lady Elpaco as his lover. I would never get an opening.

Besides—and if I ever said this out loud, I’m sure she would probably kill me—Shooter was the village chief’s favorite pet! He was strong, he was educated, he was a perfect advisor to discuss management of the territory with. That was no doubt why she’d elevated him to knighthood—so she could keep him by her side.

And if she found out that I’d fallen for him, I might get chased out of this village right when I was starting to feel at home.

“Changing the subject...I want you to serve as my personal attendant from now on, Electra.”

“But ma’am, you have Shooter to consult with on matters of administration,

and Camulla to handle guild matters. If you need a bodyguard, Dyson and I were already doing that.”

“Yes, that’s true. But now that I’ve sent Gimul off as pledge in a kinship alliance, I only have my servant Melia and the woodcutter N’aniwa at home with me. It’s a bit lonely. Even if you don’t want to be my attendant, I would still like to have you around just to talk with. What do you think?”

“How could I refuse you? If you don’t mind dealing with someone like me, I would be happy to attend to you!”

“Would you, now? Marvelous. Then stop sleeping at the adventurer’s guild and move to my manor immediately. Tonight. And if you like, I’ll even keep you company at night.”

“K-keep me...company...?” I gulped.

If things went on like they had much longer, I would rot away in this village without ever getting married, an old maid of an adventurer long past her prime. But even so, I’d never imagined that I might be the village chief’s companion in her bedchamber. There were worse fates.

The village chief’s voice cut through my thoughts. “You spend all your evenings grouching over your drinks in the mess hall of the adventurer’s guild, do you not? I have responsibilities in managing the territory, so I don’t ever take alcohol personally, but I can give you someone to talk to. I haven’t been able to leave the village in the many, many years since I married into Apegut, so I would love to hear stories about the outside world.”

“Ha ha ha...of course, yes, that’s it! Yes, that makes perfect sense.”

“Hm? Why are you so flustered? Do you need fresh air?”

“I-It’s nothing, ma’am!”

I’ve always been a talkative sort, and I can talk as long as someone is willing to listen. When I told the village chief that, she regarded me dubiously, then looked up at me. “You’re an odd one.”

And of course she was so *lonely* now that she was all by herself. If I could satisfy her, then I would do my utmost to keep her company. And if she deigned

to open up to me, I could handle anything. Even tears—anything!

Afterword:

Yeah, It's an Afterword

I'M SO GLAD I was able to bring you a second volume of *Buck Naked in Another World*, thanks to your wonderful support.

Thank you so much. Truly, truly, I thank you. I grovel before you, buck naked!

This book is a continuation of volume one of these holy chronicles (available today!) and it collects the chapters from the felling of the basilisks to the part where Shooter returns to the village and begins his new life. We bundled these stories together in a way that would make sense even for readers who don't necessarily want to go out and buy the revised version of the first volume.

I hope you enjoyed meeting all the new characters!

The scene that I personally found most memorable is when the village chief Alexandricia stands atop the hill and surveys the land below with her huge ambitions.

"Nothing has come easily in my life, but this land on the outskirts of the kingdom is brimming with possibility."

This line not only conveys the village chief's state of mind, but it also feels like it's telling me, as the author writing this novel, "If I keep going, an opportunity will present itself." It's one of my favorites.

Now I'd like to express my gratitude.

To my book manager O-sama and all the other publishers, thank you for your tireless guidance not only with the earlier stories of *Buck Naked*, but this new one as well. Thank you also for all the hard work you put in to bring the story to all its comic book forms.

I also appreciate all the support I've received from the many illustrators and mangaka across all the different mediums—in the web serial, the earlier stories, and the manga.

And even though he works for a different company, thank you to Mochiusa-

sensei, who allowed me to collaborate with him after *Dungeon wa li zo!* went through its own novelization.

And my greatest thanks go out to all you readers. I hope to see you again sometime in the *Buck Naked* series!

Please continue to enjoy the *Buck Naked in Another World* series for a long time to come!

—MADOKA KOTANI
AN AUSPICIOUS DAY IN JULY 2019

A black and white manga-style illustration of two young women in swimsuits. The woman on the right has long dark hair tied in a high ponytail with a large bow, and she is wearing a dark-colored bikini. The woman on the left has long light-colored hair and is wearing a light-colored bikini with a ruffled bottom. They are both smiling and looking towards the viewer. The background is a simple gradient with some water ripples at the bottom.

A new volume of
your story is now
on sale! Congrats,
Mr. Slave!

Look for us in
the next volume,
coming soon!
See you there!

Hellnyaa



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